

UC Santa Cruz

Out in the Redwoods

Title

Ekua Omosupe: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965-2003

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EKUA OMOSUPE

Interviewer: Irene Reti: *Ekua Omosupe was interviewed on February 22, 2002 in Santa Cruz, California. She was a graduate student in literature at UCSC from 1985 to 1997, and received her Ph.D. in literature. She has been a faculty member in the English department at Cabrillo Community College since 1992. Ekua's poems and essays are published in various journals and anthologies. Her first book of poetry, Legacy, was published by Talking Circles Press.*

Reti: Let's start by talking about your early life. Where were you born?

Omosupe: I was born in 1951 on a plantation in Yazoo County, Mississippi. So it was a very long journey from sharecropping and poverty, to a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Cruz. I came from a family that valued education; however it did not have a lot of access. Since I'm African American, we can figure out numerous reasons as to why there was no access. My mother was only able to achieve a sixth grade education because she had to work in the fields chopping cotton, helping to support the family before she was of age to go to the fields. She was the oldest daughter, the oldest child, so it naturally fell to her to be the child care provider while the adults were out working. As she came of age, and the other children were growing up right behind her, then there was another child who could step in and do the child care responsibilities during the field time.

My mother always impressed upon us the importance of education. She said, "If you have an education, it is something that *they* (meaning the white power structure, the white people) would not be able to take away from you, and it would definitely improve your chances." At least that certainly is what we all believe. Here in the United States we are sold that dream: get an education and work hard and you can be anyone you want to



be. You don't have to spend your life impoverished. Of course we find that that's not wholly true.

I was attending a segregated high school in Yazoo County, Mississippi. I was born and raised in the South. Even though my dad joined the army when he was eighteen, we never got out of the situation that we were in, in terms of being impoverished, though we were not as impoverished as many. Still, the army did promise an opportunity, an advantage, but my father, for whatever reasons, never got an FHA loan to purchase a home for our family. I realized through some of my own research and reading that he wasn't the only black soldier that fell into that situation, because the way the VA, FHA and those other federally funded institutions worked was that even though black men qualified, if they hadn't been dishonorably discharged, for whatever real and some trumped-up reasons that there were, that would immediately cancel them out in terms of qualifying for VA and FHA and all of those other things. But many black men did not have an opportunity, because these organizations worked in collusion with community, county, and state governments who blocked access to people who deserved it. There's really good research done by Karen Brodtkin on how Jews became white. She talks at great length about VA, FHA and all these other organizations who were supposed to be there to help and to give to military men what they deserved as part of the promised package of service.

I know I digress, but it all makes sense. Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, [when] I was fourteen years old, and that cracked the door for me. Scouts from various private universities and private schools were looking in counties and states at students who were promising. These scouts went out and searched for students through the counseling divisions of various high schools. They found me. I was recommended through my counseling department from N.D. Taylor High School for one of these academic summer programs that focused on math, English, and science. I was recommended to Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. I went, and while I was there I did really well, so I was offered a scholarship to Mount Greylock Regional High School in Williamstown, Massachusetts, right near Williams College. I lived with a host family that was white. They were very generous and kind people who were very sensitive to issues of racism and discrimination and the subtleties of how these institutions worked. I graduated from Mount Greylock Regional High School in 1969. I was eighteen years old.



I went back to Mount Holyoke's summer program that senior summer. It operated very much like Summer Bridge or Special Programs does [at] UCSC. I did well. I had already been accepted in early decision to Mount Holyoke, provided I did well my senior year, and I did well in the summer program after graduation, which I did. So I went there as a freshperson. I did one and a half years at Mount Holyoke College. I felt very displaced, very alienated, and very confused. So I left there, and I got married over that following summer. I married a man, and had three children.

Nine years later I was a re-entry woman at the age of twenty-nine. I left the marriage; I had the babies; I was a single mom. The youngest child was nine months old. The middle child was four; the oldest child was six. We caught a Greyhound bus from Birmingham, Alabama, in 1980 and went to Colorado where my family lived by then. That was my dad's last duty station, Colorado Springs, Colorado. I re-entered at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs, which is the extension of Boulder University. I went there from 1980 until 1985. I graduated with distinction in English literature and applied to UC Santa Cruz. It was my first choice of three colleges that I applied to for graduate work. I got accepted. I came to Santa Cruz in 1985.

On August 18 I arrived in this town with a 9 x 12 trailer, a 1967 Ford station wagon. That trailer had everything we owned in it. At the time I was in a relationship with a man again, Larry Johnson, who helped me to move here and to get my house and everything situated. Then he went away and I still had the children.

That was how I got here to UC Santa Cruz. Claire Braz-Valentine advocated heartily for me when I applied. I didn't know this until years later, when I had a conversation with her regarding my acceptance into the graduate program. She told me that there were stacks of applications, because at that time they accepted only twelve people into the American literature graduate program. My application was among these piles and stacks. She felt very strongly that I would be a very good candidate for the graduate program. She said, "Look at all of these things that you need to consider. Aside from the fact that she does have good grades, she is a single mom; she's an African-American woman; she has raised these children; she has worked and continued to have good grades. She deserves to be here." She said several times when the committee had brushed my application aside she would pick it up and put it back at the center of the table, back on the nearest stack and say, "No, we have to look at this."



Reti: She was a department assistant. It's very interesting that she could play that role. She's an amazing teacher and writer as well.

Omosupe: Yes, she was always so kind to me from the time that I arrived. I didn't know any of this story. My kids and I were living in our car because I didn't know that the rents were so exorbitant. I didn't know that I needed to apply for Family Student Housing. I had an impression that I could pretty much make my way the way that I had done in Colorado Springs. I had housing because I had a section 8. So I was going to school, and still had state or federal support to help me to maintain my family while I was studying so that I didn't have to rely on assistance. I thought I could have found a place near the school, and close enough so the children would be able to get back and forth to their elementary school or junior high, and be able to take care of my business. It wasn't like that though. It was not like that. We ended up living in our car and being harassed by the police because you're not supposed to park. We didn't know that either.

Reti: Welcome to Santa Cruz.

Omosupe: That was almost sixteen years ago. Now the terrorizing against the homeless has definitely escalated. They'd knock on the car window. "You can't park here. You have to get up. You have to leave." So we'd just drive around. At first I was able to amuse the children by saying we were on a long camping trip. But pretty soon they got tired. "I want to go home. Where is home? I'm tired of barbecuing dinner every day." You know kids. It's fun for a little while, but...

It was Claire Braz-Valentine again who... I called and talked to her and told her my situation. She began to petition whoever she needed to to see if I could get some funds early, and to get me into Family Student Housing. I did get into Family Student Housing, and she got some funds for me and I was able to rent on Beach Street. They offered deals at that time. In Beach Flats at the hotel over there... It was something like, when you register for a week you get two days for free. It was a campaign strategy to get people to rent rooms. So we rented a cottage and stayed there for awhile. I had to go back again and ask welfare for assistance because we were running out of everything. It's hard with kids. It's hard without kids, but it's way harder with kids. So that's part of how I got here.

Reti: What attracted you to UC Santa Cruz in particular?



Omosupe: I was looking for a college that had a strong reputation for American literature and freedom in study. What do I mean by that? Meaning that, yes, you always have a program and a curriculum to follow, but they're not so rigid that they lock you in. You can expand what that major means, or recreate it if you need to, just as long as you followed the principal guidelines of what was expected of you. And of course a university that gave Ph.D.'s that had a strong reputation. I was also looking to study with teachers who were of African-American descent, in this kind of a setting. I saw a brochure that they sent to me. It had Nate Mackey on it. I thought, this is great. I assumed that if there was one black person there were others. But I made a wrong assumption, which is something my mother would always warn me about when I was growing up. Don't assume. I finally think I have internalized that lesson. But there wasn't a whole bunch. There was just Nate Mackey. But that was one thing that attracted me. And the brochure made promises about the beauty of the town. You got the impression that the beauty was not only in the landscape but possibly in the people who lived here. So it was a combination of naiveté, idealism, and really believing what I saw on the brochure and what was offered.

Mostly the way I heard about UC Santa Cruz was, when I took my Graduate Record Exams there was a little box that said, if you are a minority you can become a part of the minority lottery pool. Which meant that if you marked this box, your name and whatever other pertinent information would be distributed to all of these colleges and universities that were a part of this lottery. They would send you information, applications if you would like, for admission, for financial aid. That way also, it allowed you to become aware of what is out there in the academy. So that's what I did. I got a plethora of information from everywhere. Colleges inviting me to apply. So that's how I heard about UC Santa Cruz, and why I applied.

Reti: Had you heard anything about UCSC or Santa Cruz having a LGBT community?

Omosupe: No, because I wasn't out yet. I didn't come out until I was thirty-three years old and I was here at UC Santa Cruz. I had been very aware, since I was ten years old, that I was different, and that was I attracted to women, to girls. The first attractions I didn't understand as my wanting to be intimate with these women, but just understanding that I liked them *so* much, so much more than I could express, and I didn't mind if we hugged or whatever. My first experience with a girl was when I was ten years old. However, I think that all children are interested in discovering and exploring about sex and sexuality. Most of the time we are taught that it is something



nasty that we have to feel ashamed of and hide. We hear about it on the schoolyard mostly, or adults cautioning us not to do certain things because it's bad. You know the kinds of reasons they give. I didn't even know that there was such a term as *lesbian*. I knew very early though, that if girls liked girls in *that* way, and boys liked boys in *that* way, that there was something wrong with you. I became very closeted. I didn't want anybody to know that I was feeling this way. So one side of my mind allowed me to suppress, but the other part of my mind was always thinking about it. "Why is this bad? I really like Annie." I had girlfriends. We would play around and be intimate every time that we were together. But we never talked about it and we never exposed ourselves, because we were afraid. It's funny how you know things but you don't talk about it. There was an agreement among us not to talk about it. But whenever we got a chance we would be together. It was very strange, but that's probably very common.

Not to make a comparison in this way, to say that they are equal. However, it is very similar... I was a child who was a survivor of incest. I knew that my uncle did that to me, but I couldn't approach my uncle or talk to him and say that that was bad. But whenever he got a chance, he was pawing on me. You know what I mean? You don't talk about it, but it's happening. So it was like that in terms of it being so closeted. The difference being that I wanted to be with those girlfriends.

So when I came out, I really came out. I came out of that closet when I was thirty-three years old. I gave testimony. I'd say: "I'm a gay woman; I'm a lesbian," to anybody. Men who came on to me—"I'm not interested. I like women." Which was pretty bold, when I think about it, considering how there's so much homophobia and violence connected to it. That is, I guess, a part of being naive sometimes. And I didn't learn about the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Center until I was way into my graduate studies. It was the early-1990s, I guess, before I knew about it.

Reti: When you came here were there other lesbians of color who were support for you?

Omosupe: I had met an African-American woman named Madonna, in Nate Mackey's *Harlem Renaissance Literature* class, a beautiful black woman. I felt very, very attracted to her. I still couldn't quite figure out, what *is* going on here? We started having conversations. I realized that not only was I attracted to her, but I was attracted to several other women I had met. It was through her that I started to dialogue about being gay, because she was definitely a lesbian and had been out since she was probably an early teenager. She was with a partner whom she had been with for at least four years when I



met her. She started to talk to me, and I talked to her, and she introduced me to other lesbians. So I met other lesbians of color who were [mostly] Latina in the beginning. And then I met people in Oakland, because Madonna was from the Oakland area, at least she had lived there and knew people. Besides that, since she was a lesbian, she already had connections with the lesbian communities. So she would introduce me to people or I'd meet somebody at a party. Then I'd end up meeting people who lived in Oakland or in San Francisco.

I got to know lesbians. But I didn't meet many African-American lesbians over here in Santa Cruz. I met most of them in Oakland, going to parties. For a long time, aside from her, I wasn't sure if there was another African-American lesbian around. The African-American lesbians were probably not very many at UC at that time, or we hadn't crossed paths, or something like that. But as I became more aware and embraced my own lesbianism, more graduate students... I remember a few graduate students who were African-American lesbians came to the program during the latter part of my engagement in graduate studies. So I got to know some then.

What I did notice is that it was really difficult to connect with white lesbians. I found that it was difficult because I wasn't a single woman. I was a single mom. It's kind of like that in the straight world too, that if you are a woman with children it's difficult to form romance relationships and to work at developing something that is more long-term. And that's okay, people do get to make their own choices. But I felt really alienated sometimes.

I also felt that racism and classism were issues that weren't talked about, and that prevented connections. Not just with me, but talking to other lesbians of color, they had some of the very same feelings or analyses regarding race and class. But I think that it didn't negatively affect me in that I began to negatively judge my own lesbianism. It was still okay with me that I was a lesbian. If I was going to have to be a lesbian by myself, well, so be it. I felt also very positive that there were other women out there who had their own struggles with race, and they had maybe come to some insights, wouldn't have the same barriers. So I was hopeful, because the world is very large and the community is not this little community. The community is very large. So I started to step out more, and my children were growing and getting more mature and independent, so it was easier for me to be able to meet people. Because my goal wasn't just to find a lover, or a mate, however wonderful it would have been. It's also wanting some validation, because validation is very much an assurance that you're not crazy. You're okay. That's



what I was looking for. Eventually, I did start to have that. But it was real hard in the beginning.

Reti: Were there faculty who were your mentors?

Omosupe: I definitely consider Bettina Aptheker one of my mentors. I highly appreciate and respect her for all the work that she does, that she has done, how she embraces *all* of us, whether we are lesbian or not. She was so present, and so aware of issues that I was confronting. I definitely felt that there was space to talk with her about those things, not only in office hours, but also I was her teaching assistant for a number of years. Also, in our group meetings and clusters there was always space for talk. She would always cover issues regarding race, class, and gender in her lectures that were so important and needed to be looked at. She would address to feminists the necessity of expanding the definition of feminism. It's not just a focus on gender and class. Race has to be at the center of the discussion, because these issues confront all of us. So I appreciated her a lot.

I also got encouragement from Nate Mackey. I had problems with different instructors from time to time. Not extreme, but I did run into some issues. But I would say that Bettina Aptheker and Nate Mackey were two people whom I got support from that inspired me.

Then when I was working on my dissertation, Angela Davis was absolutely the most supportive and profound person. She was really there for me and helped me to get through this process, to get done. She came in the middle-1990s. I had been advanced to candidacy in 1990, and I got a job at Cabrillo College in 1992. I was teaching a full load, plus working on the dissertation, and I finally got it done in 1997.

It's been a long haul. This advanced degree, higher education has cost me a great deal, not only in terms of money, in having to pay back student loans. In terms of my children and my family, it has also cost me a great deal. Living at the University, my family being scapegoated. It was difficult. But I got through. The children are still alive, blessed be. But it was hard.

Reti: You wrote a poem to Lucille Clifton.

Omosupe: Yes. Claire Braz-Valentine said to me when we first met, "There is a woman, a poet, whom you absolutely must meet. Her name is Lucille Clifton. Do you know of her?"



Do you know of her work?" I said, "No, I don't." She turned me on to Lucille's work, and then she introduced us. Lucille was a fantastic mentor for me. I also worked with her as a teaching assistant for her poetry classes. I worked for her for three quarters. We did at least three readings together. At the last reading we did together she said, "Ekua. I'm not worried about you no more. You be a poet." I said, "Oh, thank you, Lucille." So that is why I wrote that poem to Lucille in my book *Legacy*.

Reti: What about staff who were mentors?

Omosupe: Jacquelyn Marie in the library. She's the only one, really, whom I absolutely know. I called upon her many times. I'd go to the library and she was always very helpful. There are other women there but I don't know their names. I talked to her a lot. We developed a relationship. But I have to say that every time I went to the library, whoever was there was always very kind and helpful. I didn't have any misgivings about them. They were all good. But she was absolutely the best. She always followed through. She would always let me know if something came in that I might be interested in because of my work. It was great. I loved her. I respect her a great deal.

Reti: What about the classes you were taking in the program? What was that like for you?

Omosupe: Generally I had good success in my classes. However I took a year-long seminar with Forrest Robinson and Susan Gillman in American literature. They team-taught the course. I remember once we were engaged in a long, old argument about what is American literature, who are American writers, of course relying on mostly the white forefathers who are the American writers. There was a young man in the program who had recently come. His name was Russ. Russ and I had volunteered to do a presentation on a writer whose name I don't remember right now. Russ met with me before class to check in and see if we were somewhat synchronized, or more than that: "These are things that I'm thinking of. Do you think that they are appropriate?" I said, "Absolutely. And these are the things I'm thinking of, and this is what I am going to talk about so it's going to be nice."

So we go to class, and the structure is that presenters have five or seven minutes each, because this is a three-hour seminar, and not only do we have presenters, but we also have work that we have to cover through discussion. Russ opts to give his presentation first. So he went first and he got the utmost respect, attention. Then my turn came, and



Forrest Robinson interrupted me three times because he was in disagreement with things that I was saying. I was challenging this representation of the American writer. They are not all white. We do have Frederick Douglass. We have Anna Julia Cooper. So the first time he interrupted me I said, "Excuse me. I'm not done yet. I have a few more points to make." Then I made another point. Interruption. The third time I said, "Excuse me. What do you want? Do you want me to regurgitate to you what all of the other critics have already said? Do you want me to give you my earnest, critical, analytical, feedback? Or do *you* want to do the presentation?" There was silence for a few moments. Then he said that the purpose of the presentation was to open the door for discussion. I said, "I realize that, and that's what I am doing. However I have been interrupted several times. No one interrupted Russ. He had a chance to finish. Am I making so many points that are off- base? Am I wrong? I don't understand." "Well," he said, "Obviously we need to take a little distance here. So we're just going to go ahead and take our break. And then we'll come back." Of course I felt very beaten up. And all of my white colleagues appeared not to have a problem with what was going on here. In fact, I feel pretty certain that they thought I probably was off-base, that I was personalizing, that I obviously missed a point. I did not come back to the second session of the class, because I was one of the speakers on a panel in Bettina Aptheker's *Introduction to Feminism* course. So I didn't go back, and I don't know what happened after I left.

When I went back the following week they wanted to proceed with business as usual. No one even mentioned what had happened the time before. No one even commented on the fact that I did not show up for the second part of the session. Nobody cared, except for one woman, Christine Mergozzi, who was a foreign student. I had been her teaching assistant in *Introduction to Feminism*. We had developed a friendship. In her thickly accented voice Christine Mergozzi said, "I wish to make a comment on how the class treated Ekua the last time we met." You could hear a pin drop. Forrest Robinson said, "Well, what is it? "I think that you treated her in a very sexist, racist, and classist manner." Then the class blew up. "How dare you say that to us? No one in here is racist!" Then someone else spoke: "I want to know what Ekua thinks." I said, "You treated me in a very racist, classist, and sexist manner. You did not allow me to finish my speaking. You interrupted. You acted as if obviously I was off-base. I don't feel that that was appropriate and it really hurt me, the way you treated me."

Well, there were people that thought I was off-base, that the things I wanted to talk about were not the things that were the feature, (Excuse me. It's part of the literature.) that I



personalized too much. I said, “Well, racism, classism, and sexism are very personal to me. You have the luxury, perhaps, of speaking on these issues only from an intellectual perspective. But I live them everyday. So it is personal. And for the comment regarding, I was being too subjective, excuse me, all interpretations are subjective, so it’s not like that is such a brilliant insight.” People whom I thought were my friendly colleagues spoke up and said, “I think we’ve spent too much time on this. I’d like to move on with the business of the day.” Then Ellen Hart spoke up and said, “I understand perhaps your desire to move forward. However, we can’t just drop this subject as if it doesn’t matter. Because we’re colleagues and we have to work together.” That was basically the end of that discussion. Susan Gillman... I can’t remember if it was after this particular discussion or just before Forrest Robinson had us go to break in the previous meeting, but she was trying to make things nice by talking about the seduction of the literature. I said, “Well, that is part of my point here. We have all been seduced into believing that these are the representative American writers, and they are not. They are in the mainstream. They are in the academy. They are when you talk about art and letters. But you are definitely dealing from the myopic perspective, that the best writers and the only writers are white writers, therefore they are the American writers. But that’s not true.”

Another time, maybe a week or so later, I spoke to Susan Gillman and she told me that I personalize. I said, well they just don’t get it and they don’t have to get it. Just so they don’t prevent me from being able to move through this program and get my degree. Because that’s what I’m after. And I knew that they had the power to do that. However, I must say that towards the end, in terms of being a reader and being on my dissertation committee, Susan Gillman was there and she did read my work. She did give me feedback. She did sign off on my dissertation. I have to say she is a person who towards the end really came through for me.

But it was not easy. In my second year suddenly there wasn’t enough financial aid for me. I have three kids and I live in Family Student Housing. I am a poor woman. I went to Marta Morello-Frosch, who is another person I must name as a support person for my second focus, which was Latin American literature. She was there for me. I went to Marta and I told her that I did not have enough money. I also told Claire. I said, “They told me at Financial Aid to get a job at McDonald’s to help support my family, because they did not have enough financial aid for me.” I said, “Not only did that hurt me, it completely insulted me! I don’t have time to work at McDonald’s. I am a graduate



student.” I also thought that it was very racist for whoever it was to say that to me. I told Marta and I told Claire, “I feel as if they are trying to drive me out and drive me away. I don’t want that to happen.” I said, “Surely there is money. Nobody told me when I came here that financial aid was going to be an issue. Everybody knew that I have three children and I’m supporting them on my own.”

I don’t know what Marta and Claire did, but I know they acted in good faith on my behalf and got money for me. After that I never had another problem with my financial aid. They spoke up for me, and then I got a new financial aid representative, Liz Martin-Garcia. A wonderful woman. I have to say, she too was very, very instrumental in my having what I needed to get through. She took really good care to see to that. The testimony is that she does that for all students, that she is faithful and true, and really knows her job and what is available even when you don’t know. She will find what you need. I love her. My heart swells just thinking about her and what she did. She was so beautiful and wonderful for me.

Reti: How has it been for you living in the community of Santa Cruz?

Omosupe: There are many people who love and support me. I feel their love. I see their support. I will say that the majority of those supporters are students. Students that I have had at UCSC, because I taught at UCSC in Special Programs, Summer Bridge, for twelve years. Oh yes, I have to mention Rosie Cabrera. Wonderful loving woman and sister to many. Oh my Lord! Just thinking about the times when I was depressed and feeling very destitute or in despair, not having what I needed, how I was able to go to her and she was there for me. Rosie was one of the first people... There was a dean of SAA/EOP named Arturo Pacheco. He came before Michael Grigsby and Allen Fields. Arturo Pacheco and Rosie Cabrera gave me my first chance to teach. At Summer Bridge, they hired me to teach a section of the core course. It was at that time that Ed Guerrero and his wife, Alvina Cantana, (They were primary people in the Summer Bridge program.) saw that I had talent, that I was intelligent, and they thought also that I was probably going to be a good teacher. So they all agreed that I should have one of those positions. So I got hired and I did well that first summer.

Then I applied, and I got an opportunity to teach in the Oakes core course that fall. So for some years I taught in the Oakes core course. That program really prepared me to be the teacher that I became.



I had many students in the Summer Bridge program over those twelve years, many students at Cabrillo College over the ten years that I have been there. I have been here in Santa Cruz seventeen years now. I came in 1985. Time goes so fast. I was a mere sweet young woman in her thirties and now I am fifty years old. So I've been here a long time.

Some of these people moved out of the student role, into community organizing, into activism. Oh, the myriad ways in which we can do our work for liberation and in the world. These people became my friends. Some of them are my ex-students, who still, after years, send me letters and notes and cards to testify that what they learned with me helped them to move into some of the spaces where they are. That is so powerful and so beautiful. Some of those people are still in Santa Cruz, although many have gone away. So they, being who they were out there in the community, introduced me to other people in the community who are also support people. I had nothing to do with their education process in a classroom context, but they've invited me to do things. The base of support just grows bigger. It's really good. I feel blessed to have that because these are people who look out for me out there in the world, who will speak up, not just for me, but who will speak up for what is right. They won't be silent on issues regarding race, class, gender, the homeless—all of these things that we are confronted with on a daily basis. I know that all of us can't be everywhere all of the time, and we have to choose our battles. I know that. I recognize that many of these people choose their battles, because they recognize that they are a part of the larger community, the larger world. It's not just about them. And those are some of the things that we shared when I was their teacher. It's what I write about, things of this nature. So I would say that in that sense I have had tremendous support, and still do, through networking.

I'll also say that I've had difficult times here, with housing. I remember being driven from an apartment that my children and I lived in on Capitola Road because this man next door was a racist bigot. He harassed me about noise. He called the sheriff about nine times on me and my family for noise. But there *was* no noise. That was the problem. I told him that he was expecting to hear noise because of all of his stereotypes regarding people of color, black people especially. I said, "You really need to leave us alone because we are not bothering you." I was renting an apartment through Karon Properties. I went to Karon Properties and expressed to them the terrible harassment, and how many times the sheriff had been to our house. And instead of them chastising that man, they sent one of their agents to my house to rearrange my living room so that the man wouldn't hear music coming from my stereo. I said, "This is wrong. You should, in my opinion, be



challenging the neighbor.” He said, “Well, he’s lived here eight years.” I said, “I don’t care. I’ve lived here x number of months. I pay my rent every month. I have certain rights. Why is it that he is so upset with me, and the people next door don’t even have a marginal complaint? Do you ever think about that?”

The sheriff came to my house one day when I was in bed with the flu. My children were at school. [He came] with a noise complaint from the neighbor. I said, “Sir, do you hear any noise? Is there any music in my house?” He said, “No ma’am. I didn’t hear a thing when I came to the door, and I don’t hear anything now.” I said, “Sir, that is because I am sick in bed with the flu. I haven’t turned on my stereo for days.” He said, “Well, I got a call this morning and I told the complainant that she had three choices. You can go to mediation. You can file a complaint with the realtor, or you can place the alleged violator under citizen’s arrest. She chose citizen’s arrest.” She chose citizen’s arrest, and so he told me that he was there to check about the noise complaint and to hand me this piece of paper that said that I was under citizen’s arrest. I was supposed to call the district attorney’s office, and set up a court date. I said, “This is insane. I don’t understand. Why are these people able to do this to me? That man next door told me in front of the Karon Properties representative that he did not want to know that I was there. He didn’t want to know my family was there. He said, ‘I will be on you like a fly on a stick if I hear you.’” I said to the representative, “Are you going to let him get away with that?” He said, “She has a right to live in this apartment and to listen to her stereo.” He goes, “I’ll be on her.” They did not ask him to move. What they did is encourage us to go to conflict resolution. I called and made an appointment. None of the times that I suggested worked for the family next door. They were not interested. So of course the court dropped this citizen’s arrest thing. I imagine they said, “We have too many things to do. What is this?” So that got dropped, pending the conflict resolution. But the neighbors never, ever could fit it into their schedule. Eventually the court thing disappeared.

But it wasn’t the last time they called the sheriff. The last time they called the sheriff was one night when I was home with a friend. We were listening to some jazz. It wasn’t rap. It wasn’t reggae. It wasn’t blasting. I did not blast the music. Well, I get a knock on the door and there are three sheriffs there. There is one sheriff standing at my door, there is one sheriff standing in the courtyard a few feet away, and there is one sheriff standing in the parking lot. This guy comes up. He’s got his hand on his gun. I mean he’s not about to pull his gun or anything, but he’s got his hand on his gun! That terrifies me. “I came because I have a noise complaint. We have had at least nine calls regarding you and



noise. If we have to come out here again you are going to pay for every time the sheriff has had to show up at your house for noise complaints.” I said, “Sir, do you hear any noise? Did you hear any noise before you knocked on the door?” “No, but that’s not my concern. My concern is that we have a complaint.” I said, “Sir, come on in.” He came in my house. The other guy stood at the door. The other guy moved from the parking lot into the yard. I told them that I was really being harassed. I tried to be as humble as I possibly could, because I didn’t want them to feel that I was being disrespectful, or that I was challenging them in any way, because I wasn’t. I think my warmth finally won the sheriff over, because I talked in my kindest voice—let there be no malice or rage detected. I brought him in and I showed him all my music. I showed him what I had been listening to for some time, and asked him if he could please help me because these people obviously did not want me to be there. He said, “Ma’am there’s really nothing I can do. All I can do is respond to the call. Now I don’t hear any noise, but maybe there was noise before I showed up.” I said, “No sir. I have a witness here that there was no noise. This has been going on for some time.”

To make a longer story short, the sheriffs left. They did not give me a citation or a ticket. They said “You need to work on solving this.” I said, “I don’t know how to solve it, because it seems to me that whoever makes the first call is believed and they have one-up. I have been trying really hard and I don’t know what else to do.”

I called Karon Properties and expressed to them what had happened, for the last time. The woman I spoke to said that maybe I would need to make other arrangements. I said, “Why do I need to make other arrangements? I’m not the one who is harassing anybody here. It’s very clear that this man really hates black people and he doesn’t want my family to be here.” She said, “Well, the best we can do is release you from your lease and give you your deposit back, provided the house is in the same condition it was in when you moved in, and call it a day.” I said, “Ma’am you’re a woman. You know about sexism and what that discrimination feels like.” She said, “Yes, I’m a woman and I’m a Jew.” I said, “Then you must know what anti-semitism feels like. Could you please allow yourself to feel those things so that you could be in my position for just a moment, so that you can understand what it is I’m going through and why this is unfair.” She told me that basically it wasn’t up to her and that this was a decision that they had made. So I broke down. I hung the phone up and did all of my crying and raging. Then I called them back and told them that indeed I would move. I did. But it was really hard.



I felt so much like my daughter did when she was twelve years old and we lived at Family Student Housing. There was a bully there about her age, who harassed her repeatedly. He called her nigger. He told her she was fat, ugly. I had told my children not to fight. I wanted them to be nonviolent. I had encouraged them to avoid violence at any cost. However, if somebody's pounding on you, you got to defend yourself. That's what I told them, basically. I watched them avoid fighting. I would hear things going on. I'd look out the window and I'd see. I wouldn't interfere. They'd work really hard not to fight. So repeatedly my daughter complained to me. We went to see the parents of this young boy a couple of times. The second time we went they gave the same story to my daughter. "Just be strong. Don't let what he says bother you." My daughter said, "Why do I have to be the strong one? Why don't you tell your son that what he's doing is not all right? My mom taught me not to fight, but one of these days someone is going to really hurt your son. He might even get killed because he disrespects everybody and he is so mean. And he can get away with that." I said, "What my daughter is saying is really true. Everyone is not as tolerant. I'm tired of coming here and making the same complaint, and I'm not going to tell my daughter anymore not to hit your son. You've got to do something." They had a couple of fights after that. I could not believe that it was okay with them.

It took me all the way back to Central High School, 1957, these black students trying to integrate this high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. Even though the Supreme Court had passed the desegregation law in 1954, it was 1957 before these students were trying to integrate this school. Why? Because there was so much resistance who wants to deal with it? But you've got some brave souls, nine kids with Daisy Bates. They go to that school to integrate it and you have a whole white community. There are little children, high school children, mothers. They are all standing out there screaming at those kids saying, "Niggers go back to Africa! We don't want you here! Keep Central High School white." Parents teaching their children this. And they expect us to just take it, to just turn the other cheek. Those students were so brave, so courageous. They went through that. They opened the door for all of us who were going to be coming along later. They and so many others like them, who were so brave. The incident with my daughter took me right back there. Here are these parents saying basically to their son, it's okay for you to treat her... Which will definitely expand to all women, as if she doesn't count, her feelings don't matter. "Abuse her. It's okay. She's black? Oh, it *really* doesn't matter." They had two sons and this is what they are learning. How could that mother just sit there and say



it's okay for her boy to abuse another girl, whether it is verbally or physically? It was horrible. So that was one story.

The worst story about being at UC Santa Cruz was when my ten-year-old boy was accused of raping a five-year-old white girl. That is the *worst* thing that happened for us at UC. We lived in the Family Student Housing complex. My son was ten. My daughter was twelve, and my youngest daughter was almost eight years old. There was a story that had circulated that said that this little girl had been molested. Oh, what a horrible story! I am a parent. I am a woman. I am *very* concerned about the safety of all of us, and especially the safety of children. I said, "Oh, my God. What a horrible thing." So I'm right there with other parents, trying to determine what to do. Who did this? Nobody knows. They named four suspects. They were all little white boys. I didn't know this, but the parents of those four boys did not cooperate with the campus police and the investigation. My children went on vacation to their father and their grandmother.

My son and my daughter were gone a whole month and I never heard a word about my child being a suspect. As soon as he set his foot back on campus at Family Student Housing, the campus police showed up at my house and told me that my son had been named as a suspect. I said, "That is very curious, because all of these months that this has been going on my son has never even been brought up. I don't understand why now he is a suspect." "Well, we have some new evidence." (The evidence is that nobody else cooperated.) I said, "Oh, this is a terrible thing. If my son did this I will cooperate." I'm being a good American citizen. So it turns out that they want to question my son. I explain to my son what he's being accused of. He is so shocked, after I explain to him what it means. Because he doesn't even know what it means. I explain to him what it means and he is so shocked. He said, "Oh Mom, I would never, ever do that." I said, "I believe you, but they have to do an investigation so I said that they could talk to you."

I didn't know much of anything, okay? My son is interrogated by two police officers, and this woman police officer says to me, "I have been dealing with perpetrators and anything to do with criminal behavior and breaking the law for seven years, and I usually know when a suspect is telling the truth or lying. But in this case I just can't tell." Here's a ten-year-old boy, and here's a grown woman who tells me she has seven years of experience. And she can't tell if my son is lying to her. As if he is already this full-blown criminal that they have to guard against. I said, "That's incredible. My son said he didn't do that and he didn't even understand what it meant when I told him." She said, "Well, we'll have to continue this investigation."



I was terrified. I went to the meeting that the chancellor had set up with the alleged victim, the mother, and the father, who was a UCSC student who lived in Family Student Housing, used to work on my car, and had never once mentioned to me that this was going on, that my son was a suspect. I went to this meeting because another concerned parent in the community told me that there was a meeting and that we should go. She went as my support person. I wasn't expected to be there. When I did show up, I did not receive a warm welcome. And that woman, the mother of the child, said very hysterically, "I will not be in the same room with this woman whose son did this horrible thing to my daughter." I said, "Excuse me, ma'am. We don't know that my son did anything to your daughter." Well, she had her agenda too, you know, trying to file a suit against the University and whatever else was going on there. I spoke up on my son's behalf, how the police had basically scapegoated my son, and said that he was guilty when none of the other parents had cooperated in an investigation, and that I felt very violated that my family now was being scapegoated, had a bad reputation in the community. "My son," I told them, "is considered one of the nicest boys in the community. I have letters that different members in our community have written to me, complimenting my son's fine manners, and his helpfulness. You are accusing him of this terrible thing because I agreed to go along with the investigation."

I realized I needed a lawyer, and I didn't have any money. So Bettina Aptheker told me about a man who used to teach a course in law at UC Santa Cruz. He was not a practicing lawyer but he did have a law degree. He was an older man. I can't remember his name right now. But I talked to him and he told me that I would need to get a lawyer because this was bigger than anything that I would be able to handle by myself. I told him I didn't have any money. What could he do? He couldn't do anything. So I went to Bettina and I told her what was going on. And Bettina, with other faculty that she approached, created a lawyer fund for me. They donated money out of their own pockets, teachers that were my teachers, and maybe other people that I don't know about.

I went downtown and found a lawyer. This lawyer said to me after I told her my story that she definitely saw that I had a discrimination suit. She said, "What has happened to you is not okay." So she began to prepare my case. And her boss told her that she could not represent me, that she could work to get the boy unentangled from the juvenile system, but that she could not represent me. I said, "Why? Here's the University who has done this terrible thing to me and to my children, and I have no one to speak up on my



behalf. They treat me like a hysterical black bitch. It's not okay with me, and you are telling me that a little reprimand is going to take care of it. But it's not." I didn't have money. I couldn't pursue anything.

What had happened, just to back up a minute, was that I'd ended up having to take my son to the juvenile division on Graham Hill Road so we could have an interview there with one of the counselors. First of all, I told them how we had ended up there, that I was the only one who had cooperated, etc. It didn't matter to him. He told me that I had to sign a paper that said that my son would be on probation for six years. I said we haven't even had an investigation or a court date. You're asking me to just sign this paper so that my son is on probation and he has a juvenile record. Nothing has been proven. He said to me that if I didn't sign that paper that I ran the risk of having my son removed from my home. I was terrified. Of course I signed that paper. I told the lawyer that I had signed the paper. She said, "You signed that paper under duress. That is not okay." So she helped to get a meeting with that counselor, and told them that what had happened was not okay, and whatever else she needed to say in legal jargon language. I got my son released from that.

I drove my son around with me every place I went, so that he could hear me advocating for him, trying to be heard. I expressed to him numerous times that, "What you see happening right now, is something that poor people, women and children and black people have to deal with all the time. We don't have any power in this society. We don't have any money. We cannot find good representation, people who will stand up with us and for us because they believe our stories and they know that we need help." I said, "Do you understand these things I'm telling you?" He would say, "Yes, I understand." And I would ask him everyday if he did what they said. He said, "No, I did not do that." He became very depressed.

I went to another meeting with the chancellor and I said, "My family is really falling apart. I do not know what else I can do. I have pleaded with everybody who I thought could help me but no one is paying attention to me and my son. No one is recognizing the terrible damage this will have on my son's psyche, on his self-esteem, and his development as a sexual being. No one is paying attention. In fact no one is even talking about it. I really, really need help. First of all, I need the police to be challenged on the way they have been conducting their investigation. Because I agreed to cooperate, my family is guilty. I would like very much for something to be done."



I don't know if he used his influence on my behalf or not. I think it was actually the lawyer who called the campus police on more than one occasion. The first investigation unfortunately I didn't sit in on. But when I saw how my son was wrecked and the things that people said to me afterwards, I sat in on every questioning after that. I told them that I felt that they owed my son a public apology. They needed to write a letter to the community. "Get it distributed any way you can. Say that you were wrong." They said, "We can't do that. The best we can do is just withdraw." Okay? What does that sound like to you? We can just withdraw. I just raped and violated you and your family. No. You get no apologies from me, but I will take my weapon away right now. And that is what they did. I was trying to handle everything all by myself. But Bettina Aptheker really supported me. She told me, "You don't have to walk through this alone. I'm here for you. There are other people here for you and we will support you." They did. And she did. It was horrible.

The way the situation ended is that the campus police finally gave me a phone call one morning and said that all the charges were dropped. I said to them, "I'm glad the charges are dropped, and you owe my family an apology, a public apology." But as I've already told you, none of that was coming forth. It was like, we're done with this. Business as usual. No accountability to this day.

Reti: And you were trying to be a student through this?

Omosupe: I'm trying to be a graduate student. I'm a teaching assistant. I'm a single mom. I'm a lesbian. I'm a black woman. I'm poor. Now, did this discrimination come against me because of one of these elements? I would imagine that every one of those elements was influential in the way those people treated me.

My son was sixteen years old. I'd just gotten my job at Cabrillo College, in 1992. My very first semester there a person walks up to me, a man, and he says, "Are you Ekua Omosupe?" I said "Yes, I am." He hands me a summons from the mother of that allegedly raped victim. She is trying to sue me for damages done to her daughter seven years ago. So again, I had to go and find a lawyer to respond to this woman's attempts. The lawyers handled that and took care of it. I never heard from her again. She was determined to get something.

I am the first woman to speak out against any kind of sexual abuse and violence. Any time. Anywhere. No matter. I would definitely not protect my son or anybody else that I



knew perpetrated a crime. I would not do that. Here this woman is on my heels again. I said, God, will she ever give up? Will she ever just leave me alone? I read the reports regarding the daughter's examinations. The doctors could not be clear that the child was actually molested. The child might have been, but there was no scarring about her body and her genitalia that indicated to them that she had been raped. When she was interviewed by the campus police, she told fantastic stories that were of a fairy-tale nature, saying that she came into my home, that I let her in to play with my children, that I let them all be naked, that they played games and I watched them. It turns out that this child was born with a stroke. Her brain didn't get enough oxygen. She is mentally challenged, and she also had seizures. If something happened to her, she deserves justice. Whoever did this to her needs to be handled in the right way. But come on, these stories are really fantastic and of a fairy-tale nature. They accepted those testimonies from the girl at the campus police as her testimony against my son. It was incredible. It was so horrible. And you know what? There were so many times when my mind and my body were split. I had to go to those classes and do my work. I had to show good face to all of these people who were against me, who already said my son was guilty. There was no proof, but he was black so that's all that mattered. I said, "Why does my son have to inherit the legacy of every black man who has been accused beforehand? This is not okay." It was like, "Oh, please. We don't want to hear you. These are the facts in front of us. The girl was violated." Yes, but it doesn't mean that my son did it. For all you know it could be her father that did it. You don't know.

It was horrible. My son was never the same after that. He was never the same. Nobody could offer me any compensation. Nobody would even come to me and say, "You know what Ekua, we did make a mistake. I'm sorry we did this. I apologize that this has happened to your family." No one ever did that. I have had to carry that around. I thank the Great Spirit that through all of that I still have faith in what human beings can accomplish if we decide to do that right thing. I don't hate any of those people, although I did feel very much hatred towards them in the early years right after I had to go through that. But I thank God that I have healed, and I continue to heal from so many things. Because as a black woman in the world, it is very difficult. It is very, very difficult to survive. History attests to that, past and present. I'm glad that they were not able to drive me out, that they did not press me into such a place of despair that I would quit.

I had to send my children away. I sent them away because I was afraid that the state would take them away from me, based on allegations that were not proven. I sent them



to live with their father and their grandmother until I moved away from Family Student Housing. They were gone about two years from me. And I lost them. I lost them. That has caused me the greatest grief. If I can use the analogy, I felt like my children got sold down the river from me. I just had to make do. In places where you expect to have support it's not always there.

So it was a really, really difficult time. But I still finished that dissertation. I got my master's degree in 1989, and people said, "Oh, are you withdrawing from the program?" "Oh, absolutely not. No, I'm not withdrawing. I'm just using this as a marker to say that I have come this far. I can petition for this part of the degree. I'm going to finish." And I did. It took me seventeen years, from the point of entry as a re-entry woman into the college at the age of twenty-nine, until the age of forty-seven, to finish. I entered at twenty-nine at the University of Colorado and got a B.A. in 1985. I earned a master's at UC Santa Cruz in 1989. I earned a Ph.D. in 1997. That's many years of work. I too internalized that part of the American dream that says if you can get an education your chances of survival are strengthened. That's what I did, and that's what I impressed upon my children, and everybody, although I know that formal education at a university or college setting is not for everyone. But it's really, really important that we always work to educate ourselves and improve ourselves so that just in case a door opens you can walk in. If there are not too many gate-keepers, which is another problem.

Reti: Would you talk about your teaching at Cabrillo Community College?

Omosupe: Yes. I like teaching a lot. I am really glad that I got a job at Cabrillo, because there aren't many African-American people who get hired there. There are not many people of color who get a full-time position at Cabrillo. I was the first African-American, full-time in the English division on a tenure track. This was 1992. I am very happy that I got hired. It hasn't been easy all the years that I have been working there, because I have definitely experienced racism, sexism, homophobia—all of that stuff has come down the pike to me. But blessed be, I like my job. As I said, I have numerous students and other people who are there and who will stand up. That has definitely helped to bring me through. In June, I will have been there ten years. I got hired in June of 1992. I teach courses that deal with the issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, being differently-abled—anything that will help develop our consciousness about how we are connected in the world, and how it's up to us to make changes. Don't depend on the government or anybody else to do it for you. Liberation has never been given to



anybody. Anybody who has been liberated, they've always had to struggle for it and fight for it.

I was division chair from 1999 to 2001. I resigned my position as division chair in March of 2001 because of the racism that I experienced in hiring practices. As the only black person who has been division chair of any of the divisions, I was very much in a token position, because people didn't completely respect me being in that position, for whatever reasons they have regarding women and color, and the fact that I'm not your mainstream heterosexual person. I'm sure that all of these things intersected. But I resigned because I am the leader of five departments. I am the boss and I need people to work as team members. This was established very early on. There are many people who were working as a team. But when it came to hiring, it's the same old practices. And it's so subtle sometimes, too, where you experience the committee playing down what might be shortcomings among the white candidates who they might really want to work there, and magnifying what they might perceive as weaknesses in the candidate of color. Then also, even if they don't verbalize it, calling upon this whole misconception of reverse discrimination. All these things.

I fought really hard to facilitate the English division as a leader on our campus, a leader in terms of its diversity, a leader in terms of its openness to changing the face of the campus. What I discovered was that there was a strong goal to keep things like they've always been. So when the committee did not listen, they resisted all of the petitions from me and one other person on the committee about the necessity of looking beyond what you've always done. Let's do it differently. They still went forth with what they wanted, which was to stack the cards. So I expressed my disappointment to the committee, to all of these people that I am supposed to be leading, and I resigned from the position. But I didn't step down quietly. I wrote a letter of resignation that became public property. I put a letter in each division member's box so that they could hear firsthand from me why I was resigning. Then I gave a copy of the letter to the vice president of instruction, who was my boss. I just let them deal with it.

As a result of my having resigned, the board of trustees, the president, and the vice president made a decision to create two new positions for growth. They created a position in the English division to hire that candidate who obviously was very qualified but not the right color, so that they could hire her. And they created a position in math for the same reasons. A candidate who was of-color, who was a woman, who no matter what couldn't get hired. They had to create these positions and they called it growth.



We'll agree. We'll do that. So we got two faculty of color hired because of my resignation and my protest. And the president of the college made a speech to indicate that we have to think diversely. We have to work towards building diversity rather than the way it's been going. But I'm waiting to see the results of all that.

So I resigned, and I do not regret having resigned. I wanted to express that it's not just about me. It's about doing the right thing. It's about the fact that you always hire people you are familiar with, which is all white people. You fill every position with white people. And then you say to me, "Well, why don't you be happy? You have a job. You work here. You have tenure." No, it shouldn't be that way. There's so much racism and covert racism that happens, and gender bias. So many things go on at the institutional level. I was working really hard to expose this, not just at Cabrillo, but expose it as an institutional way of being, so that we would be aware and work to do it differently. But my leadership they didn't really want. Because what happens is immediately when I take the position I am the disciplinarian. I have to deal with issues that all the chairs before me could just ignore. White people don't have to deal with race issues if they don't want to. That's a part of the privilege. So they didn't.

I remember getting a paper from a student wherein he castigated and abused black people, women, and homosexuals. I went to my boss with this paper that this student wrote, and said to him, "This is absolutely not acceptable. Will you talk to this student?" He told me to just handle it the best way that I could. He didn't speak to him. I said, "But this feels like an attack on me, and I'm supposed to deal with it?"

Well, I did deal with it. What I did was I dealt with it in a class context. I read the paper out-loud without identifying him, and I asked students to respond, and they did. The student said, "I was just being a devil's advocate." Other students said to him, "That doesn't work. Being a devil's advocate... That's not even a good excuse. You were very racist and sexist and homophobic and you wrote this." I was teaching my students about breaking our silences. I had no intentions of exposing this student, but I wanted the students to hear what is unacceptable. He said, "I'm sorry. I apologize." There were some students who were not willing to accept his apology. They said, "What you did isn't covered by 'I'm sorry.' You need to rethink. Have you been listening? Have you been doing the readings? Obviously not." So that is how I had to deal with the situation. And to say, "I could not keep this a secret because I had been teaching all semester about the importance of breaking our silences. Had I allowed this paper to pass without public comment, then not only am I betraying myself, I am betraying you, and I am not actually



standing up on what I believe. I could not let this person have power over me. I couldn't let this person have power over you. So that's why I read the paper. It was scary and it was hard. But I had to do that." And the students, again they just rallied to doing the right thing. No one attacked him in the classroom. No one jumped on him. They did confront him. They confronted his homophobia, his ignorance and everything else that was going on. But they didn't attack him. And what happened outside of class... I didn't hear any stories about an attack.

I have learned a great deal being at Cabrillo College. I have also contributed a great deal to my college community. I definitely have the support of many students, past and present. I also have very controversial classroom issues. I talk about contemporary issues. I like Cabrillo. It's all right. Cabrillo is like any other institution. It is white-run, white-owned. The philosophy is white. The ideals are white. It doesn't have to be that way. It could be more inclusive. But there is such an unwillingness to shift perspectives and to change. It's not just about Cabrillo that I say this, but I say this about probably just any institution. It's a corporation now. It has been corporatized. We are moving away from a system of division chairs. Where we used to have ten division chairs; now we have a system of five divisions, five deans, and under the rubric of English and business and foreign languages my division has been grouped together. Now we are not going to have division chairs. We have a dean who officiates our division per cluster of groupings. That's how they've set it up. So now there are five pods that are housing ten divisions.

It's very challenging. I learned that administration is not the place for an activist and a worker to be. If you identify with the people, with the people's rights, with the workers, you cannot be an administrator. Because it's a different team. They give you the rhetoric of all-for-one and one-for-all, but it is not true. I prefer being in the classroom, which for me is being in the trenches. And I appreciate the results of the hard work and the study that I have done. As my friend says, we've been planting and harvesting as we go along. This year I believe we have a bumper crop.

Reti: Please talk about your writing.

Omosupe: I'm a poet. I'm also an essayist. Right now I am working on my autobiography. My first collection of poetry, *Legacy*, which is autobiographical in nature, was published in 1997. I am talking very much about issues that concern me in my life—growing up, and then being grown and being a woman out in the world. But also, many



of the things I am talking about in my poetry are relevant to the larger community and the larger conditions that we face. I'm also working on another book of poems. I've got quite a bit of work done on that.

I've been writing since I was about twelve years old. That's when I became really conscious of what is a poem. The first poem I remember writing that I shared with many people was a poem about war. It was during the Vietnam era. A lot of people were dying, people that I knew and people that I didn't know. That was also the first non-religious poem that I remember writing. I became a preacher. When I was twelve years old I started preaching. I was ordained as a minister when I was twenty-one or twenty-two. I am no longer in the church in that way, because my belief system has expanded beyond what I was told to believe growing up and being in the context of the organized Christian church.

So I was already writing and giving public talks; however poetry was what I was most attracted to. I appreciated Emily Dickinson and her economy of words and how powerful those little poems were. I said, I want to write like that! It's so to the point. That's what I want. So I started practicing, using Emily Dickinson as my model in the beginning. Then after some years I said, I want to write larger poems. I had my first success with that in an academic context when I worked with Lucille Clifton because I learned with her how to do that. She writes economical poems too, but being in her workshops with other students and getting all that modeling, it just expanded.

I want to write with the power of every powerful poet that I know. And I want it to be, of course, from me. I'm inspired by them. From the time I was a child, very much like bell hooks, I used to keep journals. I used to hide the journals because I didn't want anybody to see my intimate thoughts and desires. Because in my house we didn't really talk openly about a lot of things. I guess there was embarrassment also, of being found out. What am I thinking? I'm thinking that so-and-so is very beautiful, and then on the other hand I'm writing praises to God and my poems are sometimes prayers. I used to write a lot of religious poems, I would call them. But as I grew, as my mind expanded, as my experiences became more varied, I was able to write about more different things, and to expand the poem. Now I write little, medium, and big. It just depends. I'm very proud of that first book, *Legacy*.

I'm also very proud of the first poem that ever got published, which Gloria Anzaldúa is responsible for. I was taking a seminar with Gloria Anzaldúa at UC Santa Cruz when she



was a graduate student. I might have been one of her teaching assistants, too. This was *Women of Color in the United States*. I really started writing when I finally got to graduate school. I started working more and more on my own work. I wrote a poem, "I Found Specimens of the Beautiful," that she published in *Haciendo Caras/Making Face, Making Soul*. That collection had a wide readership. I was so happy. And [now] it's in magazines. Oh! I must have thanked her profusely for opening a door so my voice could get out there. It was such a powerful thing to do in sisterhood and in the cause of liberation. Open the door. So I was very, very happy with that having happened.

I did a lot of readings on campus. I became more known because I was very outspoken regarding numerous issues. I worked really closely with women's studies, and also had a lot of opportunity there to participate in whatever public forum to share a poem. So people started to know my voice, and to ask for me, which I really appreciated a lot. I still do appreciate it. I got more and more out-there.

Then I started getting invited to go places and to read poetry, and people would always say, "Where's your book? Do you have a book?" That's another issue, getting a book published. The way the white power structure works is that only a few of us can be out there at one time making noise. Everybody knows Alice Walker. More people are familiar with Anzaldúa. People know Toni Morrison. People knew about Audre Lorde. I'm sure they had a hard time breaking through just like everybody else. Just like Hattie Gossett said, "You just a black woman. Who wants to hear what you have to say?" And that rings very, very true. So they are out there and unfortunately not a lot of people can get in. Major publishing houses are not that interested in publishing what we have to say. Bell hooks got a very strong audience. I would say that people just get lucky. I don't know what else to call it. It's not to diminish in any way the hard work, the brilliance that these women produce. I am not disrespecting or diminishing that in any way. I'm just trying to say that it is unfortunate that only a few of us get to speak at a time.

White women experience oppression too, but because of their close association with white men they have more opportunities. So their voices are out there. Also, because whiteness is considered central, neutral and normal, the model, it is assumed that when a white woman speaks and she is a feminist that she is speaking for every woman, which is not true. It is only within academic circles that we make distinctions, I think. My students, you talk to them about feminism, they know that it's about women. But they've been scared off from feminism because of all the misrepresentations, and they don't know hardly any women of color who are feminists who have written or said



anything. That disappoints me. I want people to be exposed. I want more voices to be out there.

So when I teach, any class that I teach I look for the multiplicity of voices that are speaking about these issues. I want to hear from the Asian women, from black women, from German women. I just want to hear from women. I'm trying to impress upon students that one woman can't speak for everybody, not even for the people in her own group and class. This is one of the ways that power works, is to seduce women into believing that one person can speak for all. I said, "You don't expect a white woman to be speaking for everybody, but when I speak, you think I'm speaking for every black woman that ever was. What's wrong with that picture?" So these are the things that I give to them.

I believe very, very heartily that feminism took some wrong turns in the nineteenth century, because the leading women took sides with their white brothers, as opposed to taking sides with all women and saying, "We won't stand for not only black men not to have the vote, but if we ain't getting the vote, ain't nobody getting the vote." Why didn't they do that instead of stepping back, abandoning us? That abandonment has not been forgiven, and unfortunately it hasn't been rectified. We're still dealing with that. I believe that like Barbara Smith says, feminism has to be in the cause, the philosophy, the action. The ideals have to address all women and all women's issues and concerns, or you can't really call it feminism. You can call it female self-aggrandizement, which looks a lot different than feminism.

I'm a feminist, and I have been a feminist longer than I have known about the feminist movement, longer than I knew about the women who represent themselves as feminists and who write and produce work. I have been a feminist because I believe that all women should have every right that every man has in the society, and I will fight as hard for the rich heterosexual woman as I will for the poor woman who is not heterosexual, because it's about women having our rights. [It's about being first class, because we're not—we're second-class citizens. My writing reflects all of these different parts of me and my history, the things that I learn as I move forward, and my willingness to say the unspeakable. I think that often makes people at first not like me, but they kind of come around and they realize oh, there's merit in that. I try to not let any of us get away with anything. I want fair treatment across the board. I want to be a support always to human rights. That is my agenda, always, whether I am teaching or cooking...



Reti: Do you see yourself as a lesbian activist?

Omosupe: It's all interwoven. I am an activist, who happens to be a woman of color, who happens to be a lesbian. When people say, "Oh, that's a black lesbian," somehow my position is diminished. Because when they see a white lesbian they just say, "Oh, that's a lesbian." You know what I'm saying? It's the same way with African- American writers. They don't want to be known as, "Oh, that's a black writer. Oh, that's a writer." Just because race is marked, it immediately diminishes its value in the context of the mainstream. The fact that there is a mainstream and the rest of us are marginalized—there's the problem. That's the hierarchy.

I think of myself as a strong woman who is out there in the world doing her work, who happens to be black, who happens to be born from poverty, who happens to be a poet, who happens to be a lesbian, who happens to be a mother. I feel most black when I'm among white people. Any other time I don't even think about it. You know what I mean? I'm just a person living my life. And that's how it is. I just think of myself as Ekua, who happens to be all of these things. We've been so socialized to see ourselves and others as a representation of a category. We are not always aware of what those categories represent in the mind of the mainstream. And because we're not so aware, sometimes we do internalize those notions and we accept them as truth, when in fact they don't have anything to do with who we are as a person. I was thinking of Jean Toomer, a writer from the Harlem Renaissance era, who said more than one time, "I'm a writer." He'd be introduced as a black writer. He'd say, "I'm a writer." And of course there would be silence. He wasn't the only one who spoke out in that manner. It's also really true that in the United States, race only matters in relation to people who have been racialized or marked as a race. White people don't think of themselves as being racialized. That's why there is no need for white people to identify their ethnic backgrounds. Because we are all ethnics. Every white person came from... Whether you are Italian, French, a Jew, whatever, you are an ethnic person. But ethnicity is marked as a negative in the context of the United States, and so that's why whenever there is a reference to a person of color, or from some undesirable background, they get marked. I consider myself to be many, many things. I consider myself a person and I just happen to be marked in a lot of other categories. I'm a writer. I write about lesbian things. I write about race. I write about class. I write about everything. HIV. AIDS. Death. Just everything.

A student came to me this semester, a young man who was just joining my class. The theme is *America: Myth and Reality*. He came up to me after class and he said, "Ms.



Omosupe, I can see that you are going to be a lively opponent.” I said, “Excuse me? Why do I have to be an opponent?” He didn’t even answer. He just left the classroom. He was one of the people who said, “I don’t believe in ethnicities. I only believe in America and Americans.” I said, “Well, there are not many people like you, okay? The only Americans are white people. Everybody else is hyphenated. Get it?”

Reti: I can’t imagine going up to a white male professor and saying, “Well, you are going to be a lively opponent.” It’s very disrespectful.

Omosupe: It is very disrespectful, and they would never, ever ask a white professor to give their credentials. This is not the first time at Cabrillo College wherein I have been asked, “What are your credentials? Have you taught someplace else before?” “Well, I’ve been here ten years this year. My credentials? Let’s see. I got a B.A. at the University of Colorado. I got a master’s degree and a Ph.D. at UC Santa Cruz. Does that answer you sufficiently?” No, they would not dare do that. They would not challenge the white professors in any of the ways that they challenge me. They would not do it and I know it. I never want to attack a student or make a student feel in any way invalidated. However I feel sometimes that it’s very important to point out to the student the way in which they are being complicit with the very systems that we are trying to discuss today. There are students who will work hard to sway the conversation away from the topics that we have to deal with and I say, “I know that this is a painful topic to deal with. Just imagine. I’m black and I have to sit here in front of all of you white students and I am talking about race issues. It is uncomfortable for me also. However, this is the agenda for today. Now, let’s get back to this essay. What did so-and-so mean when he said...” Have to do that. It’s a challenge. But you know what, we get challenged every day. People want to challenge your right to live in a neighborhood, to shop at a certain store, to use your credit card. They have to have three pieces of identification. That still happens. It’s funny sometimes. You have to have a sense of humor.

Reti: Is there anything you’d like to add?

Omosupe: I’m glad I had an opportunity to chat with you about some of the things that happened to me at UC Santa Cruz, because I didn’t want to leave the impression that the environment was 100 percent supportive and that everybody is treated equal and everybody acts like you deserve to be there, because they don’t. And I’m just really happy that I got a chance to tell my son’s story. My son has never gotten over that. I’m really happy to be able to expose that, that whoever comes along and reads it will know



they are not crazy if they feel the alienation. They're not crazy if they feel that they're being discriminated against, because they probably are, for some reason.

I want to encourage people to break their silences. I believe in breaking silences and telling, because I feel that it will provide more support for me, and that it will also create more surveillance on my behalf. What I mean by that, is that I will feel that there are people who are watching my back, because they know that something happened to me. I told that story so then I don't have to feel alone. There are other people who are aware. If they see me get stopped by the police, maybe it's just happenstance they are passing by, but they might be more willing to stop, and say, "Oh, I recognize that person. Let me just sit back and see if everything's going to be okay." Things like that. I feel that it is important to break our silence and create communities, because our communities are everywhere. I have the college community, the community at the grocery store, because I go there and see these people. I only see them at the grocery store because they work there, but they see me, I see them. That's a community. I'm a part of that community just because I go there and I shop. I want to always be networking and expanding the boundaries of community.

Reti: What about the lesbian community in Santa Cruz?

Omosupe: I know a number of lesbians in Santa Cruz. Many of them are my friends. Some of them come to my house, do dinners and parties. I go places where they are and meet other people. I am a member of the larger Santa Cruz lesbian community, even though I might not be necessarily known personally by a lot of people, but because I am a lesbian, I definitely do identify with the fact that there is a larger lesbian community, and if they rounded us all up I would be among them. They would sure come looking for me too. I don't necessarily have intimate connections with the larger community, but I do have connections because of people that I know. You just stay connected like that. It's networking. It's like a bunch of spiderwebs going out.

There are dykes in the larger community that I haven't seen for years. I might run into them in a coffeeshop. It's great. I don't feel like I have to show up to most things, just to be a member of the community. My place is already there because I am a lesbian. That's how I identify, and I'm always looking for other lesbians wherever I go. I'm always a lesbian. I am very happy that I am out in the world.

Reti: And you have a partner now?



Omosupe: Yes, I have a partner of eleven years, May is going to be our eleventh anniversary. Her name is Rhee Davila Omosupe. We got married in 1998. We had a beautiful ceremony at a friend's house. We exchanged rings. We just bought a house together. She helped me raise my last two children. Right now our grandson is living with us until June. He's only six years old. We've had him since the Saturday after Thanksgiving. We're helping his mother out a little bit. We have a lot of history together. We know each other's families. She is number one in my life. And she changed her name, added Omosupe to her name legally. It's all legal. So we are together and I love her very, very much. She loves me very, very much. We are very good friends. It's just beautiful. God put us together, because it's a beautiful thing.