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Interview with Blanche Wiesen Cook

Interviewer: Douglas Medina

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Douglas Medina: Today is Tuesday, April 1st, 2014. I am here with Blanche Wiesen Cook; let's start off with you telling me about yourself. Where did you grow up?

Blanche Wiesen Cook: I grew up in the Bronx, and then I went to PS 102. And then we moved to Flushing, and I went to Flushing High School. In the Bronx, I went to Junior High School 125. And then I went to Hunter College. I went to Hunter College when it was free; when it was all girls; and when it was so free, even our books were free. And, you could work, as many of us needed to do; you can work at the college, after school. So I worked for two very wonderful women, Ruth Weintraub and Mina Rees, and they are the creators of the City University of New York, and I had a great tutorial with Ruth Weintraub and Mina Rees.

And let me just say that, I always like to say my life was an accident, because all I cared about was sports. I had an accident at a big inter-city varsity event where I was a gymnast, and by accident a boy put a barbell at the end of my mats as I came out of a triple flip – don't use this – but so I couldn't major in Phys Ed, and I couldn't go to the Olympics, and my life was over. And I didn't care about anything but sports and music; I played the violin, and I was in the orchestra. And I was in all these teams, and so I couldn't major in Phys Ed, so I had to major in something else; I started taking other courses, and then I majored in History, Anthropology and Political Science. And I had the

best time, ever, at Hunter, which was one of the very best places in the world. Ruth Weintraub in Political Science was my great mentor.

Douglas: What year did you enter Hunter?

Blanche: I entered Hunter in '58. I became president of student government in 1961. That year, I invited Eleanor Roosevelt to give a talk. And she told us to "go south for freedom", and we took two buses, when I was president, to North Carolina, and sat in and had the most informative time ever; it really changed my life.

Douglas: How so?

Blanche: People don't realize how segregated Hunter was, and New York schools were. Gerald Markowitz has written a very important book called Children, Race and Power, but we didn't realize how segregated we were. But in the south, we didn't realize how cruel, and bitter, the segregation was. We went into hospitals where women were on the floor and not being cared for; we just saw things that were just incredible to see. When we came back, we knew, we just had to have profound change. And that was a beginning of a very important odyssey for me.

Douglas: Did you have this political consciousness before you entered Hunter?

Blanche: I was on the debating team in Flushing High School, so I had some political consciousness, but I started out an Ayn Rand creep; going south changed that. I went to one of her seminars which was across the street at the Graduate Center in those days. And I said this can't change without government intervention. She thought about that and she said "if you don't agree with me, get out"; and I thought: "libertarians were supposed to have conversations," so I got out. And that was the end of that, and then I became the kind of radical I became.

Douglas: How did your parents feel about you going down to North Carolina? Were they political? Did they talk about politics at home?

Blanche: My parents were very odd, politically. My father – they were sort of, I guess, the Bohemians of the 1920s, and my father's family owned a company called the North Atlantic Trading Company, which imported foods from the North Atlantic. My mother hated his family and wanted him to quit, but he drove the family trucks

to deliver to the places like Zabar's. That is all he had to do, was drive. So he became a tri-car driver and a bus driver, and became one of Mike Quill's best pals in the Transport Workers Union. He was a very great union activist, but he was not left, really. They were party people; they were not CP party people, they were playful party people. But he had this fabulous life. He is a fisherman, and he and his buddies would go off to fish in creekside waters. But my mother changed, ultimately, and became political as I became political. They both thought going south for freedom was a good thing to do.

Douglas: So they supported that?

Blanche: Yeah.

Douglas: Great. So in '61 you went down there. What year did you graduate from Hunter?

Blanche: '62.

Douglas: And then what happened?

Blanche: I went to Johns Hopkins on a fellowship, because I thought I wanted to do International Relations and I did. And then the war in Vietnam started, and we created something what is now called the Peace History Society, and that was the end of my career as an International Relations player, but I was Owen Lattimore's last U.S. student. Does that name not ring a bell for you? He was the greatest China specialist in America. He spent all his young life in China, Mongolia, and he is the man who was accused of losing China. And then he went off to Leeds, and David Harvey is his first British student when he left for Leeds, and I am his last U.S. student.

Douglas: Interesting.

Blanche: It is; it really is. So I got a great education. We created this field in Peace History because of the war in Vietnam. And then in 1963, my first teaching job was at the Historically Black College: it was called Hampton Institute, which is now Hampton University. And that really, again, enhanced my vision about what was going on; we don't need to talk about that, that is for another time. But then I came back to New York and I started teaching at Stern College, which is part of the Yeshiva University, and I told Sandi Cooper I was going to quit and drive a taxi if I didn't get another job. And then John Cammett became

dean of faculty at John Jay and he hired me, and that was 1967, I think. And so from that year to this, I have been at John Jay, having a very great time. John Jay then was completely police officers and firefighters. It was just really fun to be in a place where you felt you were changing the world. And I can tell you watching Amy Goodman, we failed – do you watch Amy Goodman?

Douglas: Yeah, sure.

Blanche: Every morning. I can't bear what is going on...

Douglas: Well, what else is there to watch?

Blanche: Yeah, I know. It's just unbearable. It's totally unbearable; the people in prison, the people – I was going to say concentration camps, but I mean, in torture chambers. It's just unbearable what was happening and this is I feel can happen on our watch – I mean, what did John Jay do, when we existed to bring human rights and liberal arts to police officers, and this happened on our watch; the militarization of the police and all of that.

Douglas: '67 was a fascinating time at CUNY; you had a lot of changes: the SEEK program had just been established, '65-'66. Bowker was appointed chancellor; Edelstein was also a very powerful player in CUNY politics and city politics; he came out of the political machine in New York City at the time. So, what did you encounter when you arrived at CUNY in '67?

Blanche: The whole idea of opening enrollment was so important. It was Julius C.C Edelstein who said, you can't have open enrollment without a SEEK program, but that is the connection. We need to make sure that we will take everybody in who wants to come, but they have to be brought up to college-level work. And that was Julius's great vision: that we will educate everybody, and we will work really hard to educate everybody. And Julius had a motto, which is a motto we need for this moment; we have needed it always. But we need it again, almost more than since before 1954; "it's better for everybody, when it's better for everybody"; that was Julius's motto. It was always very shocking to me, the opposition to open enrollment on the part of people who thought of themselves as liberals and were indeed liberals. There was a woman at Hunter, for example, who quit, rather than teach History to open enrollment students.

Douglas: Do you remember her name?

Blanche: I am not going to tell you her name, but it was something of a great shock to me, since she posed as a liberal and wrote as a liberal. And we all thought indeed she was a liberal, until the racism of that decision was so apparent.

Douglas: Well, moments of crisis usually force you to pick a side; draw a very sharp political line. And I know that the History department was one of those places and departments where there was a split, wasn't there?

Blanche: At John Jay.

Douglas: Well, at City College and several other colleges.

Blanche: There were splits in I think every History department, but I can only speak about John Jay. We had this great department; I being the first to start in there after John Cammett had a very good fortune to hire many people. And so we had a wonderful man named William P.T. Preston, who was our chair, and Gerald Markowitz was there, Mike Wallace and Ann Lane. We had a great department in many ways; Mary Gibson – you know Mary?

Douglas: I don't know her, no.

Blanche: But Gerald Markowitz and Bill Preston are very close, and we founded something called the Fund for Open Information and Accountability (FOIA Inc.) to fight for the Freedom of Information Act, which is what we need now to get Chelsea Manning out of prison and to bring Snowden home; these are heroes of freedom of information, not traitors to any cause, and certainly not traitors to America. It's just shocking in my opinion.

Douglas: Absolutely.

Blanche: I say 'in my opinion' a lot because my students wear guns to class. So I will go, "in my opinion," whenever I say anything radical.

Douglas: So how did John Jay react to the idea of open admissions in general, beyond just the History department, from your perspective?

Blanche: Well, we really supported; we had a group of faculty that really supported open admissions. I can't tell you about the folks who

didn't want it, because I was involved with the folks who did want it. And then there was one year that I was away working on my Eisenhower book primarily in Kansas; I guess that was 1976. And I got a phone call from John Cammett, Bill Preston and the president of the college who was a good friend, Don Riddle; and they called me in Abilene, Kansas, and said, you get back here, they are about to close our college. They were going to close John Jay down in this imposition of tuition moment. I got back and we organized a great big demonstration; and for the first time, police officers and firefighters marched in uniform to keep John Jay open. And we really did protest and wrote columns and so on.

Douglas: But it wasn't an attack meant only at CUNY, but the entire public sector.

Blanche: The entire public sector; so, we were activists for CUNY.

Douglas: Was there an official group that was formed; do you remember the name of it?

Blanche: Well, it was a committee to save CUNY and Julius C.C. Edelstein became the honorary chair, or the chair of that committee, and I worked very closely with him, so that we wrote a lot of the newsletter things, and editorials and, board signs; maybe that was later – it might have been a little later. But we became very close, and we worked together to keep CUNY alive when it was threatened. And Julius was this really fabulous guy, who just – the U.S. stands for freedom of speech, freedom of the press and education for everybody.

It was the one thing the U.S. had stood for. We never stood for healthcare; we never stood for public housing for everybody; but we did stand for public education for everybody. Segregated, but still for everybody, and then there was all of those – the waves and waves of retrenchment in our lifetime, and now we are seeing the biggest retrenchment in, I think, our history. I think the closing of public schools all over the United States is been going on for about 15 years, and I think Clinton, who gets a pass from all kinds of radicals – it's his prison industrial complex law, let's imprison everybody; it's his, let's end welfare as we know it and it's his testing punishment society. I don't know why Clinton gets a pass from so many people, but since Clinton – one can say, since Reagan – but Clinton didn't stop it; Clinton intensified it.

Douglas: Well, if you really want to make the argument, go back to Jimmy Carter and his tenure and then we can look at all the Democrats...

Blanche: No, I am not happy with that. Now what did Jimmy Carter do?

Douglas: It's interesting, I have been reading – I don't know if you caught the latest issue of Harper's. Adolph Reed – he is actually one of my former mentors from the New School – he makes the argument, similar to what you are saying, that we got to look at Clinton and how the neo-liberal wing of the Democratic Party had basically worn out. Other people have responded to that and said yeah, he is right, but really, let's go back to the '70s, to the '80s, and let's look at how really neo-liberalism became this ruling ideology within the Democratic Party. Let's see what Jimmy Carter has done, let's look at his record. Of course, you can say that he did so many good things, and you can say that he did so many bad things. But when you look you look at historically...

Blanche: Well, he did good things after his presidency, actually. I mean, his whole human rights efforts after his presidency.

Douglas: Yes.

Blanche: But what did he do that's so Clintonesque or Reaganesque, I really don't know.

Douglas: I will send you the article.

Blanche: I would be very interested.

Douglas: In any case, I want to hear more about the open admissions policy and Edelstein's role. Not many people have talked about that, and it seems like you knew him fairly well, so I am wondering if you could tell me – because the five demands that the students put forward didn't include open admissions. What they demanded was – the 4th demand was that, the incoming class of students would reflect proportionally the demographics of New York City. So open admission was something different, right? So what do you think about that?

Blanche: Well, I just don't really know enough; I really don't. All I know is when it was presented as an idea, I thought it was a good idea. Julius was really for it, as long as there was a SEEK program, and that was his great contribution. And that is really – when in where I entered I was writing my Eisenhower book at the time,

and I just didn't get into the fight so that I just was an activist; anything he asked me to do, I would do that. I am sorry I can't be more helpful. Richard and Mike Wallace, maybe, and Gerald Markowitz who wrote...

Douglas: I spoke to him as well.

Blanche: Okay, because he wrote the history of John Jay. He knows the ins and outs and the machinations.

Douglas: But then you came back for the imposition of tuition fight, right?

Blanche: Yeah.

Douglas: What year was that? When did you come back to join that action?

Blanche: Whenever that march was – there was a great big demonstration. Was it '76?

Douglas: It was; that is the year it was imposed.

Blanche: And was that the year they were going to try to close John Jay?

Douglas: John Jay; and Hostos was also being threatened.

Blanche: Yeah, that is when I was in Atlanta, and I came back.

Douglas: One of the things that I am trying to sort out here; some people claim that after Open Admissions, you have this wave of Black and Puerto Rican students propagating at CUNY, and some people don't see that as a coincidence that 6 years later, tuition was imposed. Do you think there is a connection there? I mean, some people claim it was the racism that brought about the imposition of tuition.

Blanche: Yeah, it could be. Why not? Sure; I mean, yeah, I do. And then – I mean, think about how racist – the end of welfare in the Clinton years. We said, we will hire our students so they could work as we worked at school, and that would make it bearable, and then we should fight for free tuition again. But the city said no, and we lost and you should check on the numbers; it was something like 23,000 students: women, mothers, who were working, going to school, on welfare, and doing very well. They were all passing their courses and doing very well, and we had offered to give them jobs and we were told no, they couldn't do it. And there

were students of mine at Hunter who fought for this, who were so enraged, they were sent off to parks to move leaves around. It was disgusting; what was more racist than that? And again, Julius opposed that, but we didn't win that, and that was one of the most disgusting moments; it really was. So I think yes, on the imposition of tuition, it's not an accident. I mean, is it Frances Fox Piven who says there are no accidents. Doesn't she say that? Isn't that her big line: there are no accidents.

I would absolutely say the effort – I mean, it's a racist situation that we don't have excellent quality high schools to prepare our students to be excellent quality color students. What is up with that? What is going on here?

Douglas: In many ways you talk about this in the Newt Davidson collective; the pamphlet that you published. Do you remember going through the process of discussing how you would frame it, how you will think about CUNY at the time?

Blanche: No, I don't even know what pamphlet it was at the time. I am sorry.

Douglas: Okay.

Blanche: I mean, it was 40 years ago or 50 years ago.

Douglas: Okay, so one of the questions I am trying to answer here in my research is, there was an upsurge of activism in the '60s and '70s, but then there was a period of demobilizations; why? That demobilization in some ways contributed to the city just basically being able to impose tuition and attack the public sector. So it was in the midst of the fiscal crisis, but my question is, why do you think that movement – because there were some movements that were trying to oppose this – were not successful?

Blanche: Again, I can't answer that, because I was always an activist, so the union fought it and we became – when did Barbara Bowen and her new union group get elected, and I was part of that.

Douglas: That was in 2000.

Blanche: Okay, I was part of that. Julius had many waves – until he died – of friends of CUNY – and we met all the time to fight for better situations, for smaller classes. The whole triumph of – we lost – are you interviewing Sandi Cooper?

Douglas: I will; she is on my list; yes.

Blanche: Because Sandi Cooper as senator was very powerful in trying to stop the firing and the shrinking of the full-time faculty, so that the slave labor of part-time graduate students and many part-time faculty with PhDs, which is outrageous. And so the part-time faculty started taking over the departments, and the number – we lost something like 30% of the full-time faculty. I mean, how did that happen? Politicians? I don't know how that happened. . It's really just mysterious and it's a very bitter situation. We need another wave of activism; we absolutely need another wave of activism. The good news is – I think it's terrific you don't know about Marc Naison and the BATS [Badass Teachers Association]: there is another wave of activism; people are really organizing to stop the testing punishment society. What is creative about a situation of just endless boring tests? Have you ever looked at these tests?

Douglas: Oh yeah.

Blanche: We've got to go back to creativity; we've got to go back to real education; and we've got to have an activist movement. And Frances Fox Piven is part of it, and I love that we are both in this book on socialism, imaginary socialism.

Douglas: Yes.

Blanche: Didn't she give you a copy?

Douglas: No, I don't have one yet, but I have read some chapters online.

Blanche: Also you should go – well it's a fundraising, never mind. But have you seen the Independent?

Douglas: Sure. Well, one of the things is that the students in '69 were essentially saying “look, this is a public university, who is smacked in the middle of a black and brown community, yet we don't have access to it”. Some people have never set foot inside of City College, and the people who felt threatened by them basically said, in coded language, well, the standards will suffer if you allow these people to come in; if you have open admissions, City College is going to go to “shit” basically; that is what they were saying basically. And it doesn't surprise me that some people left because of the substance. Can you say more about that, because that hasn't gone away: the issue of standards; we are still talking about standards and more specifically,

meritocracy; admission standards based on merit, grades and SAT scores. How can we fight that; how can we address that? The meritocracy – the idea of access to opportunity.

Blanche: Well, I have had a great, good fortune of teaching John Jay, where students have no idea how brilliant they are; and they are police officers and firefighters. All of a sudden you tell them, all I want from you is to write and to argue; all you have to do is argue with me. I have never given a test in my life; not one. I don't give tests, but they have to read; they have to go on commondreams.org; and they have to write and take a stand and be opinionated every single class; and that is their assignment. They have to start with a family history to interview the oldest person in their family, and really go deep. What was it like when they came here, wherever they came from? Whether they came from the north or from the south or they came from an island or if they moved from the Bronx to Queens. Do a family history, and so then the goal is to write, and all of a sudden everybody is involved. So how do we get everybody involved? And they read Howard Zinn, and they keep a journal, and that is class.

Douglas: So what kind of movement do we need to basically – so they take your class?

Blanche: We need a movement to create creative – we need creative teachers and creative students. And we need to realize that we can change the world; and we are changing the world, but the Koch brothers are buying the world. Did you see that thing on Common Dreams today? I just turned it on and it's really shocking. Oh, maybe Marilyn Young sent it. It wasn't on Common Dreams. It was a report that Forbes did.

Forbes just did a report; 67 richest people on earth have more money than something like one-third of the human population; something like 300 million people. And it's like okay, so we are talking about this huge gap between the rich and the poor, which rivals the Gilded Age. And we're talking about this new period of unemployment which rivals the Great Depression; and there really are almost one-third of the young people in the United States right now are unemployed just as during the 1930's during the Great Depression. And look who is talking about it; it's like no big deal. It's really kind of scary. And then when you think about, okay, when did the neo-liberalism of the Democratic Party start – I just saw the LBJ – Did you see the LBJ play?

Douglas: No.

Blanche: It's really worth seeing. Yeah, Broadway. It's all about the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Douglas: I will check it out.

Blanche: Yeah, check it out, because that was the end of the Democrats in the south. Like, when did it happen? And so then, what you are looking at – okay, when did this move among the Democrats really happens? It happens during the war in Vietnam, it happens after the war in Vietnam, but it's really what happens to get the south back, means that is the strategy. And it is really worth looking at; the Civil Rights Act in 1964. And it is interesting too because you see a kind of juggling that LBJ does, if he doesn't get credit for; even Bob Caro doesn't give him sufficient credit for his years as a teacher for underprivileged kids, which so shaped his commitment, actually to doing it, and the War on Poverty. And there is Fannie Lou Hamer, and it's really very powerful.

Douglas: I will definitely check it out. I think you are absolutely right; the '60s in general, from the liberal perspective and the radical perspective. You had Black nationalists, you have Black Marxists, you had DSTS; these were serious movements that wanted to see change and they were doing something about it, were backing it. But you also mentioned something that I am also interested in, which is access to opportunity, but not just opportunity; it was access to a credential, so that the students could access the labor market. I think that is another piece that is also missing in the analysis of CUNY and what happened in '69 and '76, because after all the economy was changing at the time, from manufacturing to service economy. And that goes back to the mid '60s all the way through the '70s, so part of what I am thinking about here is that we are putting too much pressure on education to be the panacea for a broader ill that the society is experiencing. What was Obama saying? Access to opportunity: that is how we are going to solve inequality and poverty; that seems to be the key. I think that is false, but what do you think about that? Is education really the answer? That seems to be the answer from a lot of politicians' mouth.

Blanche: Well, you can't do without education. If you look at somebody like Pauli Murray, she faces Jim Crow and she faces Jane Crow.

She can't go to Harvard Law School, she winds up ultimately in – well, she goes to Howard Law School. She graduated from

Howard in 1932; she becomes an activist; she organizes the first sit-ins in the 40s. Look at Pauli Murray; a song in a weary throat for that trajectory; can you do it without education? No. And one other thing about desegregating the Historically Black Colleges – I mean, they didn't want to desegregate, because they were providing excellent education. So you have Spelman, and you still have Spelman. You have Hampton, and you still have Hampton, but until desegregation, Hampton was a vocational school. And then, one of the things that I did when I was at Hampton, was I insisted to my friends in the State Department that Hampton students get residencies to the State Department that we could integrate; and we did. But it was like, people had to fight for that – I mean the State Department was completely segregated into the mid-'60s; I mean, there were no Black people at all. So how do you fight for it?

You can't do it without education, but there has to be – as much as we can say Obama has been a disappointment – and I mean, what is this constitutional law man doing with drones? Look at the reaction to him, on the part of the conservative right. They are out of their minds; they'd rather close the government down than deal with a president of color in struggle. And one thing you should get before you leave is, Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde taught in the open enrollment, and Lost and Found just published Adrienne's – the first year of open enrollment at City College; she and Audre were together at CCNY.

Douglas: I will check it out.

Blanche: Yeah, I will bring you in so you can get a copy.

Douglas: How much time do we have? I want to be respectful of your time.

Blanche: Yeah, five more minutes.

Douglas: Great; so let's bring it to a close, then. I want to go back to this idea of meritocracy and democracy, because I think it's crucial to understanding CUNY. Again, the students in '69 were fighting for democratic access, and in '76, this idea of meritocracy – because the standards did change again; they increased the GPA that was required for students to come in. That tension seems to continue at CUNY. Again, what do we need to do to create a movement to care about these things first of all, because it seems that people buy into the idea of meritocracy; I need to do well in

school in order to get into CUNY public institution; what do we need to do?

Blanche:

Here I am not following you exactly, because to get into Hunter – when I went to Hunter, you needed to do well. I never thought that was a bad thing. I think that what we really need to do is to make sure that everybody gets educated. What are we doing in the high schools? Well, before the high schools, what are we doing K—12 so that our children are not sufficiently prepared? That really is the biggest problem. Once folks are sufficiently prepared and they can read, and think, and think critically, and reason – I mean that is what we need to do.

We need to have small classes – Eleanor Roosevelt said it in 1934. She gave a speech which is in my Eleanor Roosevelt book: “we will go ahead together or we will go down together”. She also said subsequently, “I can give you full employment and 100% literacy; one teacher, five students; full employment and 100% literacy”; how about that?

[00:39:59]