

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Wednesday, August 15, 2007 – INCOMPLETE

Subject: Interview with Pamela Salaam

Location: My office

Time: 1:00-3:30pm

Pamela Salaam called me at about 1pm. I couldn't hear her first call, and she called back immediately. She had been directed to the basement by the guard, and found herself by the Office of Duplicating Services. I told her to say there and I would come and fetch her.

When I went downstairs Ms. Salaam was visible from down the hallway in her bright yellow-orange spaghetti strap sundress, in contrast to the drab clothing worn by the teachers here for a workshop (identifiable by their identical blue shoulder bags). We greeted one another warmly. Ms. Salaam has thin dreadlocks hanging past her shoulders. She is slightly plump, with mahogany skin. She carried a large bronze tote bag in a trapezoidal shape.

I had passed the elevator on my way down the stairs and seen a group of grumpy-looking teachers in the elevator. When Ms. Salaam and I got to the elevator, the same group had traveled down instead of up. Some did not seem happy that three people, including myself and Ms. Salaam, wanted to get on the elevator. Ms. Salaam felt my hesitation and said we would fit, if these women would just move back. None did, and we crowded on anyway. I asked if someone had pushed 3 and someone replied brusquely. As we rode up, Ms. Salaam asked me if the semester was just ending. I did not hear her the first time, since the doors opened once again at the first floor. After the doors closed I asked her what she said. As we got out on the third floor I explained that the summer session had just ended and these were teachers here for workshops. She said she had noticed that it was all women.

When we got to my office I asked her if she wanted some water, and she yes if it was no trouble. I assured her that it was not, but then I got stuck chatting with Mark, the department secretary, about my broken printer. When I arrived she took the initiative to ask me about my position and how I got to Teachers College. I explained about the postdoc. She asked if I had completed my doctoral studies, and I said yes.

She asked something like if this was the direction I knew I wanted to go in, and I told her no, that I entered graduate school with questions I had from teaching school. When I told her that I taught in a private school that recruited one or two African American or Latino children per grade or even the school, she replied that her husband was from San Francisco and was always the only person of color in his school. He even went to Trinity College, so he must be a "glutton for punishment," she joked. She went on to say that he is biracial, with an African American father (I think) and European mother, and that the mother wanted him to have a good education. I told her that I got involved in organizing with teachers on what to do about how we saw adults treating these children, and that I had questions from that experience that I was pursuing in my doctoral studies. So that

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brought me here, but I'm still not sure if I want to pursue the academic route. I apologized for the long answer, and told her I didn't know how to give a short answer to that question. She commended me on knowing why I went to graduate school, or something like that. She said not to get into her family's business, but her husband is still dealing with the ramifications of his mother's decision to send him to these schools. She says that he asks her why. [I'm not sure what the father was doing.] I say that a lot of these children of color in private schools are biracial kids struggling to find out who they are. Somehow we segued into a discussion of what counts as a good school. She says, why do we call this one a good school, and then all the resources go there?

We also talked about skin color and hair texture as being the one thing that holds children back, that they worry about what other people think of them for this one thing. She talked about going to Thailand, Singapore and ? (Indonesia?) for her honeymoon (she married her current husband five years ago). She loved Singapore for how well-run it was, so clean "you could dump your spaghetti on the floor and eat it." She reported all kind of people there, Indian, Asian, all skin colors. She said that if you (littered?) you would get fined \$500. She said that they had dealt with joblessness and homelessness, by making sure all the native men had jobs. You or I or an African American man couldn't go there and get a job, she told me, but the Indians who go there can't drive a cab, those jobs are reserved for the native men. But, if you look at the ads for the private schools, they all show "white Asians." Most people, she said, are darker than you (meaning me), and you hardly see white Asians. I asked if she noticed that lower-paying jobs were held by darker-skinned people, and she said she didn't really see. Later, she said that the lower you go occupationally, the darker the skin color. I said that I had heard about the cleanliness and orderliness, but not about the skin thing. She said most people don't talk about it.

She asked me where I was from, and I nodded when she said, "From here?" [By mentioning Thailand and Singapore, "here" for me became the US.] I told her Southern California, and that my parents were from Taiwan. I mentioned that in Taiwan light skin is also valued, and that the darkest person in the group is called black, which made her shake her head. I told her I grew up hearing that no man would want me when I laid out (in the sun) because I'd look like I worked in the fields, and that my family gives me skin lightening creams when go home [meaning Taiwan]. I told her I asked my fiancé when I first met him if that was important to him, because he was very light-skinned. She asked where he was from, and I told her he was born in Taiwan but moved here when he was 2, so he was Americanized. I told her his family was less Americanized than mine so I assumed that that would mean that skin color meant more to his family, but it didn't seem to mean much to him. His sister is darker than me, and he said it didn't matter to his family. Salaam replied, "You have to ask her," and I agreed. "He doesn't know," she told me.

She mentioned Africans and African Americans, that African Americans will say that how come Africans can come here and own a store. Imitating a snotty voice, she says, And they say, you're not really African, you're African *American*, "and then it's *on*." But

if you go into that store, you will see “a whole wall, a *whole wall*” of skin-lightening creams. I add, “and hair straightening products.”

She comments on that what we have talked about, most people won't talk about, because she's asked people about it. I tell her, well that's what I do, race talk.

She talked about being brought into a school, and the principal is talking, and she'll look past the principal right at the child and ask him, what do you like to do? When she paused I asked her if I could tape the conversation. She said yes and said she thought I would. She asked me about who was going to hear it, and I said this is exactly what we should have done first.

I talked about the Harlem project and the supplementary education project with Ed Gordon, and she said she knew the name. I explained what he wanted to accomplish, to get this idea of supplementary education into mainstream educational discourse. Short term goals, to present this material in conferences, then publish papers. Long term goal, to change the current emphasis on standardized testing. [This seemed to please her as well.]

I then gave her the description of the Harlem project and went through the consent form. I gave her the forms without asking her to sign it right there and then. She did not ask for a pen, and left with the forms. She asked about Varenne and Khambule, and when I said Eckson was a graduate student from South Africa, she said she could tell, repeating his last name.

[interview]

At the end, she mentioned that

I walked her out of the buildings, and she emphasized that she didn't get lost, she got misdirected. “The guard told me to go to the basement.” We went to the women's restroom, and she mentioned a conference she's having for girls and young women in March. She invited me to go, and to lead a workshop. She told me she's in contact with Marcia Sells, and asked if I knew who she was. I said no, and she said she was sitting right behind her in the Harlem Arts Alliance meeting. She's been in contact with Marcia Sells. I asked if Marcia Sells is offering space for the conference, and she reported Marcia saying “they weren't ready.” I repeated it skeptically, and said that if things are moving too slowly, I know that TC hosts events like this all the time. As we walked down the stairs, I told her that there are young people in the building all the time over the weekend doing workshops and all kinds of things. She asked me to send me the information over email, and I promised to do so. We parted warmly, and she reiterated that she may take advantage of my offer (to edit or help with writing).