

**Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project  
Oral History Interview - Diaspora Public Hearings Participant  
Project Organizer: The Advocates for Human Rights, Minneapolis, MN, USA  
Funder: Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, MN, USA**

**Interviewee (A): Aicha Cooper**

Interviewers (I): Dulce Foster and Leigh-Erin Irons

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I: Aicha, as we explained, this is the Liberia Oral History Project, in collaboration with The Advocates for Human Rights and the Minnesota History Center. And we are here today to talk to you about your experiences with testifying before the Truth Commission for Liberia in Saint Paul, Minnesota. First of all, why did you decide to participate in the public hearing?

A: Actually, it was more of an impromptu for me. I attended the hearing just because I was a mentor to the Liberian Women's Initiative Organization in Minnesota and it was an impromptu that they would do a presentation to the audience regarding local women's experiences here in Minnesota, who were from Liberia. So based on that I participated because I was a mentor and associated affiliated with that organization so I thought it would be a great thing to give my perspective and what I felt about the whole process and my experiences in Liberia as well.

I: You said the Liberian Women's Initiative; can you give me just a few words on what that organization does and what its purpose is?

A: Yeah it's a local, actually Minnesota based organization that pretty much invests hope in the lives of Liberian women and youth here in Minnesota, the elderly and the young people, usually girls, helping them with educational skills, life skills and just how to be a professional as they are growing up. Also the elderly program, there's an educational program for the elderly mothers as well. And it created a place where they could meet one another, speak their own language, like dialects from Liberia and feel more comfortable in that surrounding. So there are a lot of resources that the Liberian Women Initiative of Liberia provides to Liberian women and children, young women as well, in Minnesota.

I: You said it was impromptu, was it a last minute decision for the Women's Initiative, to testify, or were you saying it was impromptu, your decision to stand up and testify?

A: It was actually an impromptu for me. They already, from my understanding, they already had that in mind... I think they were already programmed to get on the panel, but I came in a little later and I was just having a conversation with the executive director and she told me about it and I was like, oh yeah, that's a great opportunity for me to, you know, join in and be a part of it because I already identify with the organization and I am a mentor with that group as well so I felt you know, it would be a great opportunity for me to be a part of that.

I: When you say the Executive Director, do you mean the Executive Director of the Advocates, Robin Phillips?

A: No, the Executive Director of the Liberian Women Initiative, which is Gloria Parker.

I: Okay, and she said would you like to come on stage and testify as well, and you chose to do that?

A: Yeah.

I: I had the wonderful opportunity of attending that session and one of the things that I noticed was that you were one of the younger people testifying. Do you feel that your age gave you a special role at the hearing process?

A: Yeah, I strongly believe that because you know, being a young woman and actually identifying with the youth of Liberia I strongly believe that the future of Liberia lies within our hands, you know. And looking at what happened in Liberia, the war... I mean there are a lot of issues associated with that. I'm sort of like, you know, I'm in a better place in the sense that I'm in the U.S, I'm not in Liberia, and I have opportunities and resources that youth in Liberia really don't have access to, or maybe limited to, but I was just looking more on, like the child soldiers or you know, the young men and women that were actually taken to fight in the war. I felt like they were perpetrators and victims as well so I felt like they needed a second chance, we needed to invest in them, we needed to talk to them, we needed to, you know, create opportunities where they would move past their guilt or whatever their feelings from the war. Because some of these children were conscientized to participate in the war, they were probably used to retaliate for, I don't know, maybe a higher a higher authority who wanted their rivalries or their enemies to hurt during the war, so these children were actually used as instruments to get plans implemented by other people who had power over them. So I felt like Liberia, I felt being a young women you know, considering issues of rape and everything else that happened during the war, I felt I could address the commission and other listeners in Liberia to let them know that the youth come very... come first and they are the ones that we should also be working with to move past you know, what happened in Liberia, to actually land at you know like, reconciliation, I mean, like a measurable reconciliation. Because when you are looking at youth in Liberia you have the effect of war on them, I mean mentally and emotionally, and even sometimes they may be physically disabled, so I felt like investing in the youth was you know, very, very important.

I: Did you feel that you were a voice for your generation at the hearings?

A: Yes, I felt so and that was one of the reasons why I felt you know, I could speak up at the panel and just give my perspective to other listeners. Because in our context, the Liberian context we always listen to our elders and sometimes it's good to listen to children or younger people. (Laughs) So that was kind of like where I came from, talking about that.

I: How did you feel about your decision to testify, afterwards? What was going through your heart and your mind about it?

A: Actually the first thing, before testifying I was a little nervous because you know, I had no idea, it was an impromptu, but afterwards I felt... I felt, I felt really good about it you know, I felt like it was a historical moment for me. You know, identifying with what happened in Liberia, being very patriotic of my country you know, the civil war we endured and the catastrophe that actually took place. You know, so afterwards I felt sad, in retrospect of what happened, but I also felt good that I was able to...that a voice was heard that could speak regarding issues like that.

I: What kinds of reactions did you get from your friends, your relatives, your neighbors, others in the community after you testified – did people talk to you about your role in it?

A: Actually, I just had a conversation with a couple of people regarding that, and they just said I was the youngest person there and I you know, was a voice for the young people, so to speak. I talked to my mom about it you know, she was quite happy that I participated in it. And just elders, like the mothers, I see the other women who actually participated on the panel as mothers and learned from them and listened to them and just hearing them explain their stories and their perspectives on what happened is just like, it was just very moving for me. They just, the women, they sort of just have, they sort of believed in me that I should

continue pursuing whatever I was pursuing in terms of advocacy or you know, community involvement, so...

I: Did you feel that was kind of affirming?

A: Um, sort of! (Laughs) I feel like I have more work to do but yeah that was kind of like... it actually gave me a different perspective, or more, it actually confirmed that yes, I need to do this more often and be a part more of the community.

I: What for you, as either a witness to the hearing or as a participant, what was the most memorable part of the public hearings for you?

A: Well, the most memorable part for me was just hearing other women talk about what they went through. I remember hearing Doctor Holder's testimony, I think she is President Holder's daughter, and she talked about her experiences and I could just empathize with whatever she said during that. Because a lot of women, like I spoke about, a lot of women have, you know, internal scars from the war, you know, the impact of war on women and children in general it has an impact on their health, reproductive health, it has an impact on their emotional state of being, their economic independence and as well as their social status. So, having, being a part of the audience and just listening to her talk about that, I just felt really, I felt more passionate towards women's issues at that point.

I: Yeah, it was a very compelling testimony, so I can empathize with that perspective. Were there any things during your testimony that you wish you had said that you didn't say, or anything that you felt was particularly important about your own testimony?

A: Actually, like, as I was speaking about women and youth issues, when I testified and when I gave my perspective about that, I just, I talked about giving second chances to the youth and all of that, but just what I think I could have said more about was like, you know, programs to really help them, that is one thing, and talking about the issues and addressing the issues and, you know, negotiating or coming to some kind of conclusion to move forward that is like, a part of the healing process. You know, but, my main issue after the testimony, after I spoke, I felt like I could have mentioned more about like, rehabilitation programs, or educational programs, counseling programs, that would have really helped the youth, giving them opportunities to actually partake in their government or their local communities. I don't think I spoke about that so afterwards that was something that I felt like I could have elaborated on a little bit more.

I: When you are talking about these social programs, are you speaking about youth in the Diaspora in particular, or youth in Liberia as well?

A: I was actually thinking both, because you have youth in Liberia right now who actually, they are actually facing the side effects of the war, like, they are still in Liberia, they are facing that. However you have Liberian youth in the Diaspora who came from Liberia or refugee camps, who never really went through counseling or a healing process to express what they went through and how they can move forward from that. You know they have that... It's kind of like a ghost that they are living with and I feel like if there were more programs, and as those children or young women or young men are moving over to the U.S, I feel like there should be some kind of counseling involved, you know. And based on that, that will help them to help with the society here as well as the one in Liberia, so I was thinking more of youth in Liberia and here as well.

I: And here as well.

A: Yeah.

I: Are there any particular programs that you would like to mention now? Anything that um... that comes to mind at this point?

A: In terms of the previous question?

I: Yeah, in terms of resources for the youth.

A: Oh, resources? Yeah, I mean like, I haven't designed any programs but I get the notion that the concern would be you know, creating dialogue for youth in Liberia and here to, you know...

I: To talk?

A: To speak to a professional. Yes, speak to a professional, talk about issues, you know. You know, like when people or children leave from Africa and come here, Liberians specifically, there is more concern on you know where to live, you know their needs. At the same time I think their mental health should be considered, you know emotional being and you know, where they are at mentally, in order to function. For example, if you have a child or like a young person coming from Liberia who went through so much in the war, and you are trying to have them enroll in school in the U.S, you know, it's like there are a lot of issues in order to make them a successful student you know, you have to do a grass root intervention, knowing their background and stuff like that. I mean, it may be... it may cost money to do that, but I mean, perhaps there are organizations that may want to provide those resources.

I: I am hoping that everyone can hear your suggestion and can do something with it.  
(Laughs)

A: Yeah! Yeah, I hope so too, yeah.

I: What were the things that you... Were there any things that you learned or heard for the first time during the public hearings that surprised you?

A: Um, let's see. Actually no... Other than testimonies that were being said...

I: (Asks something inaudible)

A: Well, other than Doctor Holder's testimony, and, no I don't think... Because I didn't really listen to all of the, I didn't really attend all of the hearings, so I, you know, I can't really speak on... on that.

I: How do you feel the TRC process, what do you think it means, the process in general to Liberians?

A: Well, I just feel that the TRC process you know, set the stage for healing in Liberia. Giving Liberians the opportunity, both perpetrators and victims, to talk about their experiences. I still like, you know, there is no future without forgiving and being able to vocalize you know, internal scars that (?) you know, and the TRC provided a tool for our nation to heal from our tragic past. And that consisted of like collective revelation of old happenings that occurred in Liberia, or at least most of the occurrences that took place in Liberia. A lot of Liberians, I am not sure exactly what their responses would be, but from the few Liberians I have talked to regarding the whole process, you know, it was a good way to engage one another to talk about what happened. Because oftentimes we never really talked about it, we moved on even though we thought about it in our hearts and in our minds, we didn't really get a chance to talk about... to vocalize it or to verbalize it. So that in itself was a good way of starting to

heal, to start the healing process. You know, and secondly I just feel like personally, an effort to arrive at, to achieve a measurable result from the TRC process, identifying the problems and discussing it and resolving it, is the way to go. Um, and I just feel that some Liberians, the few that I have talked to applauded the effort. It set a stage for Liberians to talk about issues, and to heal and to move forward and to forgive, however, some of them felt there had to be some kind of penalty associated with you know, some of the crimes that were discussed um, restorative justice and, you know there are other like... you know. They were more concerned about what happens afterwards, you know we talk about it, yes, but what is happening. And I am not too inclined about what is going on right now in Liberia regarding, you know after the TRC hearings but, restorative justice, you know, having the perpetrators and the victims, you know, to come together to move through this reconciliation process, you know, that is a concern I have. Um, but then again I can't speak for all Liberians, but in my perspective, that is what I am thinking, that, you know, a conclusive approach with both parties, would you know, help. Um, sustain that reconciliation, because what you don't want to happen is like, people being vindictive or you know, animosities stirring up that may lead to another conflict. So, I think most people are actually concerned about what happened, what is happening after the hearings. And most Liberians in the Diaspora who are actually exposed to a more legal and constructed justice system are you know, rooting for justice: "Oh yeah, what's going to happen afterwards, let people be persecuted"... or you know, have to pay something back, you know, whereas some people may be talking about justice, the most people are actually concerned about their economic stability you know, school, education and things like that. They want resources to help them move forward. Because yeah, talking about issues, and having so much money to support and to fund programs, to talk about it is good, but people in Liberia are more concerned about, okay we talked about it but okay, what are we doing now, how can you guys help us, you know. We are hungry, we need food we need resources we need education, we need more opportunities. So I think from a Liberian, a Liberia standpoint, a vantage point would be more concerned about talking about these issues, more concerned about moving forward and having the resources provided to them. Whereas Liberians from the Diaspora who are more exposed to like I said, a more constructed you know, justice system would really root for justice, you know. Because we in the Diaspora don't have to worry about, you know, food, or education opportunities, like, we already have that resource. So we are more assimilated, we are more assimilated towards like a more constructed legal system, you know, as opposed to those in Liberia.

I: That is a very interesting insight. So what I hear you saying is that if you don't have food to eat then whatever, nothing else matters as much. But once you have all your basic needs met, then you can as a population or as an individual turn towards other things like putting an end to impunity...

A: Yeah.

I:... through justice mechanisms. Is that a fair summary?

A: Yeah that's a fair summary, and just... yeah because it is kind of like if... because the security, you know people in Liberia are concerned about security... in respect to justice, you know. If for example a perpetrator talked about or confessed about what he did to a particular family, and maybe he was let go free or something, maybe if the family retaliates or tries to harm him or whatever, there is not gonna be any peace. You know, so I don't know if people in Liberia are more concerned about justice you know, because if they have security, I mean security in terms of like, being able to talk to one another about issues, and having their basic needs met, you know, that's going to eliminate more conflict. In my opinion, I think if they have resources like food and you know, or whatever else they need in Liberia I think, having a talk to you know, people that actually did them harm would be more easier as opposed to you know, being poor and telling someone who killed their mom or

something, that they have to go see, they may be more vindictive or wanting to, I don't know... I'm kind of like going in circles but I just feel like in Liberia most people may not be in tune with justice as much as providing sustainable security and peace for them.

I: That makes sense. What was your perception of the involvement of non-Liberians in the TRC process? Based on your direct observations.

A: Yeah well, regarding non-Liberians I actually, in my opinion, I think it was a good thing to have people who had some part to play in the decisions that were made during the war, or prompted the war, I thought it was a good thing to have them, you know, show empathy or have an apologetic response to the proc... to what happened in Liberia and take ownership of their actions and what they could have done wrong, or differently. So um, I think it was a good thing to incorporate that, external factors and people who actually contributed to what happened in Liberia. So non-Liberians being a part of the process was a good way to really, as we are moving forward in Liberia.

I: The testimony, I believe we did have a testimony of a non-Liberian at the hearings, did you attend that?

A: I think it was the U.S... I think he was a government official or something that... but I heard about it, so from that perspective I felt that was really good, you know, that he was able to come and talk to the Liberian people about what happened and what he thought he could have done differently.

I: Yeah. How do you feel about the hearings now that it is two years later? Have your feelings of it changed over time at all?

A: No I don't think my feelings have changed, um, you know like I said, thinking about the issues or you know, talking about what's bothering you or what actually, what you feel about what happened to you, is a good way to heal. You know, which is way better than keeping it in and having it build up, which would in the end possibly lead to another conflict, based on the division in Liberia, the various ethnicities and, economic figures, powers, and you know, just the differences, our diversities within Liberia. So like, I just strongly feel like, I still believe it was a good opportunity for us to come together as a people to talk about what happened to us and what we did. You know, because for example perpetrators actually give their story you know, it was their own volition to come forward, nobody really forced them to. So that in itself shows that they were possibly remorseful about what they did. So I think it was a good thing to set the stage for healing, the whole healing process. Yeah, so, that's what I thought then and that's still what I think now.

I: Have you been a part of any, either TRC related activities or other community activities that go towards rebuilding the Liberian community since your testimony?

A: Actually since my testimony, I have not been affiliated with any TRC activities, but I have been participating with the um... the Liberian Women Initiative, I still work with them as a mentor. I also attended a few Brooklyn Park Police Department meetings you know, to create dialogues within the community and help people to maintain peace and so forth and live comfortably in their new environment, which is Brooklyn Park, they're not you know, they weren't born there. So other than those two groups I haven't been um.. I haven't participated in any other justice related or truth and reconciliation activities other than that.

I: I'm interested to hear about these Brooklyn Park meetings, what was the focus of the discussion with the police?

A: It was just pretty much how to... there were some issues going on in Brooklyn Park. There

is a larger Liberian population in Brooklyn Park, and based on you know, cultural differences, the police department wanted to learn more about the Liberian people. And also to have the locals, the neighbors in Brooklyn Park who never really understood the cultural differences. Because sometimes the neighbors would call the police... you know, there were other Liberian neighbors that would cause problems and conflict, so the police department wanted to intervene and to like, create a dialogue on how to address some of those issues that came up in Brooklyn Park. Or possibly, is still going on in Brooklyn Park. Yeah but it was just...

I: You don't know?

A: No, I am actually in Duluth right now but um... I haven't been back since to attend any of those meetings but they, you know, they actually really wanted to engage with the Liberian community to understand their concerns, you know, to address it as well as create a peaceful environment for both Liberians and the local residents.

I: We are getting close to the... you said you had to go in a few minutes here and I just wanted to give Leigh-Erin Irons the opportunity to... Do you have any questions Leigh-Erin, in follow-up to the things we have been talking about?

L: No actually, I think it's been a wonderful, wonderful to listen to your experience.

I: Yeah, I agree. We really appreciate the time and your commitment to coming forward and participating in this oral history project, Aicha. Do you have any final things that you want to say before we go, before I let you go off to your class?

A: Well I just wanted to say thank you guys for having me on board as part of, you know, as a participant on this project. And I just, I hope that we have a resolution to issues going on in Liberia right now after the truth and reconciliation hearings, and whatever I can do in my own potential, or abilities, after graduation I do plan to execute that. So, but I do thank you guys for having me as part of the project, and I'm wishing you guys the best with everything, the documentations and everything.

I: Alright, well thank you very much for you time, I hope to see you some time in the future.

A: Okay, thank you.

I: Bye-bye.

A: Bye.