

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Sophia Wallace, Class of 2000

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 15, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Sophia Wallace discusses her involvement with WOZQ radio, FIRE (Feminist Intercultural Revolutionary Encounter), PULSE (an art collective), rugby, and various activist activities. She also describes her appreciation of President Simmons, her experiences in Sessions House, her time studying abroad in Ghana, and the general atmosphere of Smith, particularly in regards to diversity.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Holly Redmond at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Wallace, Sophia. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sophia Wallace, interview by Rachel Dean, video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Wallace, Sophia. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sophia Wallace, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 15, 2010, with:

SOPHIA WALLACE

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DEAN: This is Rachel Dean, and I'm conducting an interview with Sophia Wallace on May 15, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for taking part in this.

WALLACE: My pleasure.

DEAN: What were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools?

WALLACE: So many. I think that, first of all, it's an incredibly enriching and rigorous experience, so that in and of itself, like, the academic quality of the classes — the quality of the classes, the quality of the student body, the quality of the professors, the faculty, and then all the sort of cultural things that were happening here were outstanding. But, you know, I can't — you know, I can't overstate the power of being in a women's environment, and the way that Smith, I think, sort of brilliantly kind of cultivates this place for women. I think it had a huge impact on me, as a student, and then as I've gotten older, I actually appreciate that more and more. So it had a huge, huge impact.

DEAN: What were the reactions of your peers and your friends and your family in attending Smith?

WALLACE: You know, my friends and family and peers were all happy for me when I chose to attend Smith. There was no sort of negative reaction about it at all; everyone was very positive. I think that they (pause) maybe underestimated how great of a school it was, and — but they were happy for me. There was no sort of criticism or discouragement at all, and I think that the way that I flourished, you know, they were really excited to see that.

DEAN: Were the older women in your family college graduates, and did that influence you at all?

WALLACE: A few of them were. Many of them weren't. And so, I think that probably made me even more sort of committed to being really sort of ambitious in pursuing my education the way I wanted to.

DEAN: How did Smith live up to your expectations, and your hopes or fears?

WALLACE: Smith definitely exceeded my expectations. I knew — I expected to come and have a really good education and to be in a sort of supportive environment of women, but I feel like my entire way of thinking completely changed in my first year. Like, I went from being sort of — I don't know, I became a critical thinker, and that, I think, is huge, and I just remember the way that, you know, experiencing the writing of, like, Plato and Socrates and, you know, Weber and Marx — all these different people are just complete — that I had never been exposed to in this way, in reading, like, actual texts — just completely blew my mind. And then starting to — you know, the experience of, like, seeing a book, looking at political theory, and being, like, I don't understand this, and reading it ten times, and then finally getting it, and starting to be able to actually access texts and access material and write and engage with my peers, and be with so many inspiring, smart, stimulating women. And I think one of the things that's the most sort of profound to me was that at Smith, I sort of — I forgot that I was a woman, I was just a person, and I just did whatever the hell I wanted to do, and I think that is — it's such a huge gift, you know, and I'm really grateful that I had that experience. And I think that's the one of the things that's so — sort of creates so much opportunity for women to really be who they are, you know? I think just to be in a place where you get to just be yourself without all of the sort of projections of, you know, a sexist culture that we grew up in it. So that — I think that's really profound.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations or teams were you involved in, and how did they impact you?

WALLACE: I was involved with — I had my own radio show, I had a hip-hop radio show on WOZQ for a couple of years. I was a founding member of FIRE, which was Feminist Intercultural Revolutionary Encounter, which was a political organization. I was a founding member of PULSE, which stood for — what did it stand for? — it was all about — it was basically an art collective, kind of creative — we just did all sorts of, like, arts-related sort of community events. I played rugby. And then I also — through the political work, I got sent with several other women to go — we basically did a special project where President Simmons basically gave us a grant and we got to go to the demonstrations that happened in Seattle against the WTO, and we got to basically experience something that was very historic and sort of report on it back to the Smith community. So we sort of went there as witnesses and as — I mean, we weren't scholars yet, we were just students, but we went there, you know, planning to, like, think about it and write about it, and so I got to do that. I got to go to several conferences supported by Smith, and I mean, you know, part of the political work, again, we went and demonstrated after Amadou Diallo was shot in the back 41 times by police officers. We went out to

demonstrations in the Bronx where Al Sharpton was speaking, and, you know, in buses, and the school supported us to be able to do that, and — yeah, that's pretty amazing.

DEAN: Do you think President Simmons was really influential in your being able to attend those?

WALLACE: Yeah, I mean, President Simmons was incredible, and I think Smith — you know, at the time, I thought that the administration, not necessarily President Simmons, but that the administration was, you know, more conservative than what I would have wanted. But I mean, at the same time, I felt incredibly supported and sort of held up by the school. I was able to be a part of lots of things that were fairly, you know, progressive causes and have really the support of the administration to do that. And so that was huge, and I think, you know, now, looking at President Simmons' legacy and seeing, you know, the engineering building and that program being really vibrant — I was talking to another alum from my year about the poetry center or program, you know? There's just a lot of seeds that she planted that have really sort of come to fruition, which is exciting. So I'm very proud of that, and what she's accomplished, and how I got to have that sort of intersection with my time and her time.

DEAN: What house were you in, and then how did your house community play into a role experience?

WALLACE: My house was Sessions House, so I was at Sessions and Sessions Annex — fabulous, I loved it. It was great. And it was beautiful: for me, where I came from, I had never experienced such a (pause) you know, impressive environment, in terms of, you know, the housing, and then having people that come and clean for you and do the landscaping and do the grounds, and you know, everything was done for me and it just felt, like, completely — almost like a fairytale. So at first it was a little intimidating, but then I got very comfortable. And then just in terms of, like, the house community: it was — I don't know, it was great, it was cute, it was — it had all of its, you know, small community things, which sometimes can be, you know, irritating, like people that have been around. I remember being a first-year and feeling like that some of the upper-class people were really condescending and irritating because they didn't — because we didn't, like, know about Smith yet or something? But whatever, it was fine. It was great. I liked the house. I made good memories.

DEAN: You said where you're coming from and not used to being in that, like, privileged: can you elaborate more on that?

WALLACE: Yeah, I mean, I just — you know, I grew up very sort of working class and, you know, struggling, lower-middle class, and so, you know, I

mean, my parents rented their house. We had, like, old, used cars, you know. I mean, no one ever did any cleaning for us, or — so, it was just a totally different environment. One of the things that I had been really worried about prior to arriving at Smith was that I would be sort of competing with people who had, you know, the sort of prep school education and had much more sort of support and means in pursuing their education, and that maybe my background was sort of inferior. But I very quickly realized that that wasn't an issue. But, you know, that's another thing that I really loved about Smith and I still, you know, I'm really proud of, is that I feel that Smith is the kind of place that if you get in, they give you the financial support to come. And I had an amazing financial aid package, and that's why I was able to come, and, you know, in contrast, like, I got my master's degree from another school that's considered a really good school, and just the quality of education, there's just no comparison at all. Which, you know — disappointing for me because I have a lot more debt from that and that program was, in my opinion, almost, yeah, a joke. So — But it made me, you know, once again, sort of appreciate Smith. But, like, my — I remember my senior year, they had a program for — it was like a career program, so basically, if you had a job interview, they would give you a stipend to buy, you know, work clothes to go on your interview, and so I took advantage of that. And so I had, like, this suit that I wore to my interviews, and, you know, I wore and got my first job, and, like, that was awesome. I also did — I forgot, I did PRAXIS my junior year, so I did — I worked in a non-profit where I was working with teaching young people urban arts and culture, and poetry in the Bay Area. And that, I think, was a really phenomenal program, really amazing program. I'm not sure if it's still around, but —

DEAN: Yeah, it is. Yeah. Just out of curiosity, what school did you get your master's at?

WALLACE: I don't want to say on the record.

DEAN: OK, OK.

WALLACE: So I can tell you off record, but—

DEAN: (laughter) That's fine, OK. OK. Did you go abroad?

WALLACE: Yes. I went — I did my junior year in Ghana, in West Africa. That was also a really great experience.

DEAN: So, how was that different culture you — culturally?

WALLACE: It was profoundly different. You know, I was a government major at Smith, and so I really wanted to experience leaving the Western Hemisphere and leaving, like, "the first world," and see how that would

impact my feeling about global politics. So — And I was also really interested in the relationship between the U.S. and West Africa, in terms of slavery, and — so, those were sort of my reasons for choosing Ghana. Also, it's an English-speaking country, in addition to all the indigenous languages, so it was a great experience. It was challenging. I mean, at that time, you know — I mean, I'm a lesbian, and at that time, I had really short hair and I was, like, really committed to being out. I was out prior to coming to Smith, but I just thought, Oh, well, I'm — of course I'll continue to be out. But that wasn't actually the best strategy for Ghana. But I was able to be out to some of my friends, but it was just a — it was a very different experience, in terms of that aspects. And then I would say, you know, gender, gender-related challenges, you know, being in a really male-dominated country was different. But on the other hand, you know, like, I went in — good comparison, I went — when I first arrived to campus, I was like, Oh, well, I'll go to the radio station, I'll get my own radio show, whatever. So my male counterparts who were on the same program as me, they would both get radio shows, whereas I wasn't — you know, I wasn't really given the time of day, which I attribute to gender, not my skills, or whatever. But that program was great, it was a great experience.

DEAN: Do you think that Smith gave you a false sense of security, or was it empowering, going from this, like, place to male-dominated?

WALLACE: I never felt that Smith gave me a false sense of security. I totally disagree with that critique: I think that people who come to Smith maybe have a false — maybe because they're coming from a privileged place, maybe they have a false sense of the world, but for me, I always knew that it was a really special, unique sort of charmed existence. And I really enjoyed it, and I think it's so clear — and even I experience this now, coming back after ten years — that there's just this sort of underpinning of feminism, or if you don't want to put that kind of title and that loadedness onto it, you could just say this point of view that really — where women are sort of central, that sort of guides everything. And that profoundly impacts the way that the community is created, the way that the classes are sort of maybe thought about, the way that the languages and the way that things are described, and that is, I don't know, really important and really rare, and I think it resonates in lots of different ways. And it continues, and it allows women to become (pause) I don't know, to really become who they are and find themselves in the world, and be able to overcome, like, all sorts of the obstacles that we deal with. But, I mean, I don't — I really don't think it's a bubble. I don't. I think it needs to create its own space in order to — there has to be some sort of community to create the environment that it creates, but I don't see that in any way as being negative.

DEAN: Did you — How would you describe the atmosphere at Smith while you were here, and did you see any issues in race, class, gender, or sexuality?

WALLACE: The atmosphere in terms of students or administration or —

DEAN: Both.

WALLACE: I would describe the atmosphere of Smith as being — in the time that I was here — as being very passionately, you know, engaging the world, thinking about ideas, analyzing, discussing, very stimulating. Very enriching. Not everyone always getting along, definitely not, but a place where people were thinking, a place where people were asking questions, a place where people were challenging each other, and cared a great deal. In whatever they cared about, they cared — they had something that they cared about. I wouldn't describe it as apathetic or detached or cynical. I would describe it as sort of ardent. And in terms — there was definitely, like, race issues, there was definitely class issues. I was very involved in, you know, a lot of the political work that I was doing was about sort of challenging some of the, you know, racist incidents that were happening on campus, or sort of the lack of class awareness. Mostly, I think, my concern was a lot of times directed at the student body just as much as the administration, but I think that's normal when you bring together groups of people from different backgrounds. I mean, it's inevitable. So, I mean, there were several incidents when I was here that came up, and — but I think it's — I mean, we organized demonstrations and we had things that we did, but I think it's healthy. I think that a community should sort of challenge itself to be better, or look at its problems or look at its mistakes. So —

DEAN: What have you become since Smith?

WALLACE: I'm a photographer. I also do video as well, and I work commercially. I do, like, advertising and editorial. I also exhibit my work in galleries and museums.

DEAN: Looking back, would you encourage your daughter or other women to attend Smith now?

WALLACE: I would absolutely encourage any woman who could to attend Smith, and I have to say, many women in my life are so jealous that they couldn't go. And the more that I talk about Smith, the more they really feel sad. Like, what would their life had been if they had had this four years? Many times, you know, these are some of the hardest years of women's lives, and so, to have four years where you're absolutely embraced and supported and encouraged, and challenged in a really healthy way? And then given this, like, extra barrier against being told you can't do it, for a million different reasons, like, who wouldn't want

that, you know? And there's probably no woman in my life I wouldn't want that for. I wish that actually Smith had more graduate programs, more fellowships, more post-graduate and doctorate programs, instead of just social work and — I'm not sure; I think there's a couple of different ones, but none that relate to me. I wish there were, you know? Unfortunately, there aren't yet, but we'll see.

DEAN: What difference has a Smith education meant to you, and would you make the same choice if you had to do it again?

WALLACE: What difference has it made? Can you ask the question again?

DEAN: Yeah. What difference has a Smith education meant for you, and would you make the same choice again if you had the opportunity?

WALLACE: I think that I'm such — I'm so much further along because of Smith. I definitely think that Smith made me a better artist, a better writer, a better critical thinker, a better person, really. You know, a more self-actualized, self-aware, embodied person. I wouldn't change anything — I wish I could add on more art classes, something I kind of realized later on. Like, when I was at Smith, I — you know, because it was such a hardship for my family for me to go to college, and — I thought I had to do something serious, and while I loved the government classes that I took and I still, you know, it's not that I don't — I'm not passionate about them — but I would have loved to have been more art. But I just didn't feel like I had the right to do that, so I took, like, an art class once a year, and then all my other classes were political theory, for the most part. So, I would have liked to have done more art and dance, but I don't have any, you know, I have no regrets. I mean, I'm thrilled. I think it's, like, one of the best choices that I've made.

DEAN: We only have a few minutes left, but do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

WALLACE: I think the advice that I could give to future — current and future Smithies — it might sound trite and silly and like it's coming from, like, an older person, which I don't really know how to avoid. But that's my — my first and genuine thoughts are just to really sort of embrace your time, really enjoy what you have here, it's going to impact you in so many ways that you have no idea about. And to enjoy this time with other women and your friends, and to really go for everything you want, and really challenge yourself and push yourself. And I guess I would say — God, and this is making me sound old as well, but — to give the administration a little bit of a break sometimes. Challenge them, but also give them a little support, cut them a little slack, because they're doing an amazing job, and it's not easy. And I think that the way that they hold a lot of the sort of challenges on campus, like, their position on trans issues, for example, I think is a really brilliant and thoughtful

way to both keep a women's college and also make space for, you know, F-to-M students who want to be here. And so, I know people are really critical in a lot of different ways and they want change and progress to happen fast and faster, but from my perspective, the administration is doing a really good job.

DEAN: OK, well, thank you very much.

WALLACE: Thank you. I'm sweating! I don't know if it's the lights or the talking or both.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Holly Redmond, 26-27 May, 2011