

**Stephen Vincent Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Stephen Vincent  
**Interviewer:** Phyllis Noble  
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**Biographical Note**

Stephen Vincent served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria from 1965 to 1967 as an English teacher.

**Access**

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Stephen Vincent

June 3, 2015  
San Francisco, California

By Phyllis Noble

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

NOBLE: [00:00:03] Today is June 3rd, 2015. This is Phyllis Noble. I am interviewing Stephen Vincent, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria from 1965 to 1967. Stephen, tell us, first of all, who you are now? What are you doing today? What, what are you into?

VINCENT: [00:00:29] Well, I've in my, I'm in my 75th year, and I'm most actively involved in being an artist. My background is a poet, so I call my art poetry by other means.

NOBLE: [00:00:45] Ah.

VINCENT: [00:00:46] And I'm also busy doing my archive from over the last 50, well, I started keeping journals when I was, uh, 16.

NOBLE: [00:01:00] When you were 16?

VINCENT: [00:01:01] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:01:02] So that meant, that would mean that you kept journals while you were in the Peace Corps?

VINCENT: [00:01:05] Of course. Yes. There they are.

NOBLE: [00:01:09] Oh my goodness. Oh, you've got them right here. Wonderful. Let's go back. You're in San Francisco now?

VINCENT: [00:01:18] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:01:19] Did you grow up here in San Francisco?

VINCENT: [00:01:21] I grew up across the bay in a town called Richmond.

NOBLE: [00:01:25] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:01:25] And I was born there, as was my mother. And my father migrated there from his family, from Oklahoma in the early '20s. And so we're definitely, my mother is, I guess I'm fourth generation Californian.

NOBLE: [00:01:43] Oh, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:01:45] We go back. But Anyway, that's, yeah, geographically where I came into the world.

NOBLE: [00:01:52] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:01:52] Here. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:01:53] And you're still here.

VINCENT: [00:01:54] I've been living in San Francisco for the last 50 years. Now, even before the Peace Corps, I went to school at San Francisco State.

NOBLE: [00:02:00] Oh, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:02:01] And so I got my master's degree there.

NOBLE: [00:02:06] Deep roots here.

VINCENT: [00:02:07] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:02:07] Did you have brothers and sisters growing up?

VINCENT: [00:02:10] Yeah. Three brothers.

NOBLE: [00:02:13] Where are you in?

VINCENT: [00:02:14] I have three brothers, yeah, I'm the youngest.

NOBLE: [00:02:17] So there's four of you all together?

VINCENT: [00:02:18] Well, one is no longer with us. But, um.

NOBLE: [00:02:21] Where are you in the lineup?

VINCENT: [00:02:23] Number two.

NOBLE: [00:02:25] Uh huh. Okay.

VINCENT: [00:02:27] Very diverse. I'm the writer artist. My older brother is, was a journeyman electrician and a rancher. And my next brother down is a lawyer. And then my brother Chris, who's no longer with us, was a videographer.

NOBLE: [00:02:43] All right. Yes. Very diverse in your interests and your talents.

VINCENT: [00:02:48] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:02:49] And your parents? What do they do?

VINCENT: [00:02:53] Um, interesting. It's a little bit upstairs downstairs. My father came west with his family from Oklahoma right after the, I guess it was the so-called panic after World War I. My grandfather was a, worked for the railroad. I think he was a somewhat educated guy, and he wanted the family to, the children, or they both my grandmother and he wanted the kids to get educated. So they came to the Bay Area where, unlike parts of where they lived before, there wasn't much of an education system. And so they, um, they were, you know, from Oklahoma, Arkansas, that kind of southern side where my mother's side very much more, a little bit more highborn or a sense that they were. And they were Scots-Irish and they were involved with shipbuilding and city planning, always involved in politics.

NOBLE: [00:03:52] Ah.

VINCENT: [00:03:52] And my mother was very involved with politics, and then eventually my father. My mother, oh. And our town, she started the PTA. She was on the Helen Gahagan Douglas campaign committee, which, Helen Gahagan Douglas ran against Nixon in 1948.

NOBLE: [00:04:12] Ah.

VINCENT: [00:04:12] And he was such a bastard, you know? I mean, he'd drag anybody through mud to get elected, as we know. And so she was there. And then she was head of the city planning commission for ten years, which was kind of exceptional in the '50s for a woman to have that position. They're both University of California graduates, which was a real testimony. They were able to go to the university, which is much more difficult now, in a time in which the state needed educated people.

NOBLE: [00:04:43] Ah, yes.

VINCENT: [00:04:44] I mean, my mother's father had gone to UCLA and so forth, but Ma was certainly a first for my father's family. And you didn't have to pay anything to get a good education. And so they were pretty well educated and liked books, all of that. And so, um, and always involved with politics. And they were very, of course, in the '30s there were, I mean, there was a

very strong union movement and very. And terrible things happened, like the internment of the Japanese.

VINCENT: [00:05:15] Right, right.

NOBLE: [00:05:16] And so friends of theirs were taken off to, what did they call them, internment camps and, um. So I grew up with a fairly diverse background in which my mom was always telling my dad to enunciate. Because she felt that kind of vaguely Okie accent, axe accent, was dangerous to his career as an engineer. You know, that he wasn't, you know, I mean, the people running the Standard Oil, as you can imagine, all kind of preppies and what have you.

NOBLE: [00:05:53] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:05:53] And so, but he did well. And so I grew up in a very political circumstance.

NOBLE: [00:06:01] Yeah, nice.

VINCENT: [00:06:01] And when I, when I started, when I was 16, I was an exchange student and went to France.

NOBLE: [00:06:05] France? Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:06:06] Yeah. And of course, in California, I mean, that was my mom's idea of culture was her French teacher in high school and, you know, here you are in the Wild West, so why not be a little bit more refined and cultured?

NOBLE: [00:06:23] So you probably studied French at high school.

VINCENT: [00:06:25] Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:25] Yeah. And then you went over for a year in France?

VINCENT: [00:06:28] No, it was a summer in France.

NOBLE: [00:06:30] A summer.

VINCENT: [00:06:30] And then I went back, I did my junior year abroad in France.

NOBLE: [00:06:33] In France again?

VINCENT: [00:06:33] In Paris, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:34] In Paris. Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:06:35] So I got very fluent in French.

NOBLE: [00:06:36] In French.

VINCENT: [00:06:37] And I was astonished that they didn't send me to a, what they call them, a Francophone country.

NOBLE: [00:06:42] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:06:43] I was fully expecting that, but.

NOBLE: [00:06:45] Yes, yes. We'll, we'll get there in a minute.

VINCENT: [00:06:48] Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:49] And so then you come back from your, your year abroad. You finish up your high school.

VINCENT: [00:06:55] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:56] Where did you?

VINCENT: [00:06:57] My high school was. I grew up in Richmond, which was before the war was 10,000 people. And then because of the Kaiser Shipyards, it went to like 250,000.

NOBLE: [00:07:07] Mushroomed.

VINCENT: [00:07:08] Variables like that. And so I grew up in a town that was, you know, racially was somewhat charged. Not anything like these towns get charged today because it was before guns and things like that.

NOBLE: [00:07:23] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [00:07:24] But you know, I was the only white guy on my basketball team.

NOBLE: [00:07:27] Oh wow.

VINCENT: [00:07:28] And, yeah, there were other white guys who played there.

NOBLE: [00:07:29] But you, you did play basketball.

VINCENT: [00:07:31] Yeah. And I was very conscious of issues of, issues of race from the, the get go, because it was definitely a. And that was like a huge shock to like, especially my mother's side of the family to be, because this was different people from Appalachia and you know. I mean, I think my mother, who also wrote short stories and so forth, I thought they were characters that informed her life.

NOBLE: [00:07:59] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:07:59] So, yeah, it's very, very mixed. So I grew up in a very pluralistic kind of way.

NOBLE: [00:08:08] Yes. Yes.

VINCENT: [00:08:10] Very, it was hard, you know, to be around a lot of kids from the country and the whatever ghetto. Da da da da da. And then to be in this family where you get educated and so forth. It was like, it was.

NOBLE: [00:08:25] I'm thinking about the conversation at the dinner table at your house with.

VINCENT: [00:08:28] Well.

NOBLE: [00:08:29] Friends dropping by and the level of conversation that would go on.

VINCENT: [00:08:32] Well, my, my, my house was not the house where a lot of people. Some kids came by, but it was more instead of the Bible, it was, you know, talking about zoning laws.

NOBLE: [00:08:41] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:08:43] You know.

NOBLE: [00:08:43] Yeah, yeah. But that gave you a consciousness of government structure.

VINCENT: [00:08:48] Politics.

NOBLE: [00:08:49] Politics, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:08:49] Very aware of politics.

NOBLE: [00:08:50] Did your family travel? Did you? There were six of you, four boys and your parents? Did you take vacations?

VINCENT: [00:08:55] My dad was, my dad was actually grew up on the bay, and he was a yachts person. And then my mother didn't like the water, so he had to sell the boat. But he was, I think, you know, four kids on your way to the bay, racing every weekend. Not a good idea. And my mother threw down the, I won't say axe, but anyway, the, uh. So sold the boat and then we, like we took these enormous trips. My dad, he was an adventuresome sort. Like in 1952, we drove to the Pan American Highway, opened up from El Paso to I think it went down to Guatemala, right? But we drove that whole thing.

NOBLE: [00:09:35] All through Mexico and into Guatemala?

VINCENT: [00:09:37] In a Kaiser Vagabond. No, not into Guatemala. We just went as far as Mexico City.

NOBLE: [00:09:41] Okay.

VINCENT: [00:09:41] And then drove back around through, um, San Antonio to Mount Zion and New Mexico.

NOBLE: [00:09:48] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:09:48] All that stuff. So. And then the next summer, we went to northern Canada, you know, British Columbia.

NOBLE: [00:09:57] Wow.

VINCENT: [00:09:58] Big trips. Yellowstone Park, whatever it is. Glacier National Park. You know, big trips in three weeks.

NOBLE: [00:10:05] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:10:06] Doing like 500 miles a day.

NOBLE: [00:10:08] And your dad was the only driver? Did your mom drive too?

VINCENT: [00:10:11] She knew how to drive, but she didn't drive. My dad liked to be at the tiller, you know? So yeah, like that. So I had a lot of exposure to, I mean, the other, so to speak. I mean, always interested in strangers, you know?

NOBLE: [00:10:28] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:10:29] You know, whether they were poor Blacks in the South who had rich stories to tell or going to France and being pretty highbrow.

NOBLE: [00:10:39] Were you the first family, person in your family to, to go to Europe? To speak a foreign language?

VINCENT: [00:10:45] Yeah. My older brother, who became an electrician, had absolutely no interest.

NOBLE: [00:10:48] No interest in that.

VINCENT: [00:10:50] In academic life.

NOBLE: [00:10:50] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:10:51] Intelligent hands. And, you know, and so I was the first person really to travel.

NOBLE: [00:10:59] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:11:00] Of course, my uncles had been in the war and been to the Philippines. And my aunt was Filipino. My uncle was a pilot. And so they knew the South Pacific. It was where they were during the war.

NOBLE: [00:11:14] Yeah, yeah. So then you become of age to go to college, and you went, you, you just said where you went, I can't remember.

VINCENT: [00:11:23] Well, I went to two places. I went to the University of California, Riverside, which was. In the '50s, the University of California started. They realized they had to have a small liberal arts college so they could, like Oberlin, read all these always places, Great Books, that whole era. And so I was like one of 750 students at this place out on the desert. And it was like a monastery with girls. It was a very provincial place, you could imagine, but very good education. Yeah. But anyway, I was there and I was an exchange student, not exchange, I did my junior year abroad during that time.

NOBLE: [00:12:05] Ah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:12:05] Which was utter hell coming back to Riverside after Paris.

NOBLE: [00:12:09] Oh, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:12:10] Horrible. But I, um, but it was a very good education of a certain sort. And then I went from there. I didn't want to become a scholar. I was tired of writing critical papers. I mean, I think I'm a pretty good critic, but I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life, so. And I liked to write. And I started writing poetry. So I went to San Francisco State and they had a.

NOBLE: [00:12:37] You've already got your undergraduate degree at that point?

VINCENT: [00:12:39] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:12:39] Okay.

VINCENT: [00:12:41] And, um, so I did the writing program at San Francisco State with a focus on poetry. And I studied with people like Wright Morris and Kay Boyle and, you know, interesting people. And, uh, but it was at a time when I entered San Francisco State in early 1962, and the whole civil rights thing had really broken out. And Berkeley gets a lot of attention for the free speech movement, but Berkeley had very few students of color.

NOBLE: [00:13:15] Ah.

VINCENT: [00:13:15] San Francisco State, on the other hand, had a fairly large population of, uh, not huge minor, but a minority, of so-called minority students. And I always disliked the term minority. It seemed to be degrading to me to call anybody a minority, but in any case. So and San Francisco and the Bay Area had a whole strong tradition of leftist politics and unions, and they liked to send their children to San Francisco State because that was more working class. And so it had a very activist side and a very, um.

VINCENT: [00:13:57] So by my, I think it was 1963, not the, not. In 1963, that's when we started having the sit-ins in San Francisco and the Sheraton Palace, the supermarkets. These were all around issues of labor, getting these people to hire people of color.

NOBLE: [00:14:20] Okay. And so it wasn't the soda fountain, getting served a Coca-Cola question?

VINCENT: [00:14:25] No, no, this is more about hiring.

NOBLE: [00:14:28] Hiring.

VINCENT: [00:14:28] Hiring and housing and stuff like that.

NOBLE: [00:14:32] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:14:33] And so we turned the town upside down. And I always thought that that might, I never got arrested because I didn't want to put myself at risk in terms of certain things that I wanted to do. And so I, um. But we were just really kind of 24 by 7 involved with all of this, you know, sitting, sitting in, walking, you know, just constantly picketing places. And that was. And then that, that was in '63. And then the, um, by the. Was it the summer of '63 or summer of '64? Summer of '64 I think it was the Freedom Riders and the busses and so forth and people going to the south. I didn't go to the south, but there were still, there was a strong contingent of people.

NOBLE: [00:15:27] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:15:28] I think Mario Savio had gone to the south, the leader of the Free Speech movement, or one of the leaders. And so I, um, I was involved with CORE. Was it CORE, the Congress of, Congress of Racial Equality?

NOBLE: [00:15:43] That's right.

VINCENT: [00:15:44] Right. So but anyway, that was, uh. So that's where I was, of course. And a certain amount of the stuff was like against the Vietnam, war in Vietnam.

NOBLE: [00:15:57] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [00:15:57] But it was more, actually in my recollection, it was more focused on issues of race.

NOBLE: [00:16:03] Racial justice, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:16:04] Racial. Yeah. And we were all.

NOBLE: [00:16:05] Were you doing were you doing academic work at the same time? Was there time for it?

VINCENT: [00:16:10] I was writing, actually, and I wrote about what I was doing, the demonstrations and so forth. And that was a large part of my thesis was dealing with. One of it was like dealing with this basketball team that I was on, which all these things were conscious in my heart, you know. Dealing with this the whole, uh, sense of race and what, you know, because I grew up in this town where the people who lived on the hill weren't going to my high school.

NOBLE: [00:16:44] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [00:16:45] And but they were people I'd grown up going to the YMCA and so forth. And so there was a lot of class consciousness that I had.

NOBLE: [00:16:53] And then the basketball was a high school thing?

VINCENT: [00:16:57] Yeah. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:16:58] Did you continue playing in college? No. But your thinking was still going back to?

VINCENT: [00:17:02] Oh, very. I mean, I'm in this very.

NOBLE: [00:17:03] The dynamics.

VINCENT: [00:17:04] Very intense thing.

NOBLE: [00:17:05] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:17:06] The dynamics of this was enormous because there was on this team, they sort of liked to be in league with, um, and comrades, so to speak, with all these Black players.

NOBLE: [00:17:19] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:17:20] Was kind of like weird from a white perspective, right? Or it was new, this like.

NOBLE: [00:17:27] Very unusual.

VINCENT: [00:17:28] Like we're talking about 1958, '59, you know, so it was like very, you know. Not that race isn't a foremost question in the country today, but, you know, it's very. So anyway. And so when I got to, um, college and then to get involved again in issues of race around equality and so forth. This is like an ongoing threat, I think. And, um, what can I say? So I was very involved there. And then the Vietnam War and then there was, I mean, it was like really kind of difficult for me in certain ways because I, I didn't want to go to the Vietnam War.

NOBLE: [00:18:08] Uh uh.

VINCENT: [00:18:08] And I didn't want to put, you know, 2 pounds of sugar under my armpits to create a, what happened? People did that because everybody was worried about their physicals, right?

NOBLE: [00:18:21] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:18:22] That they'd get out of the war by not passing the physical.

NOBLE: [00:18:25] So you could you put sugar under your armpits and that would?

VINCENT: [00:18:28] There were different things that people did up there. Blood pressure up there, diabetes factor, whatever it was, I don't know what it was, but people were doing. If they weren't going off to Canada or.

NOBLE: [00:18:42] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:18:42] You know, there was all this stuff going on. So it was very difficult for any, at that time, any male between 18, when he had to register, and 26 as to what to do.

NOBLE: [00:18:53] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:18:54] I was very.

NOBLE: [00:18:55] Conscientious objector was not an easy path.

VINCENT: [00:18:58] No, I didn't, it didn't, uh, attract me or it wasn't in my background.

NOBLE: [00:19:05] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:19:05] I wasn't raised a Quaker or whatever.

NOBLE: [00:19:07] So your choices were going to Canada or somehow faking the physical.

VINCENT: [00:19:12] Or you could get married. And would.

NOBLE: [00:19:15] Oh, would that give you an exemption?

VINCENT: [00:19:16] Up until 1964.

NOBLE: [00:19:18] Oh.

VINCENT: [00:19:19] Then they switched that.

NOBLE: [00:19:20] And then there was something else you could do.

VINCENT: [00:19:23] Well, join the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:19:24] There you go.

VINCENT: [00:19:26] So. And then, of course, that was fraught because the Peace Corps was subject, just because of the political consciousness here was like, this was a neo colonial, you know, the Peace Corps was just an arm of imperialism and what have you. And if you joined the Peace Corps, you were somehow in league with the.

NOBLE: [00:19:47] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:19:47] So there were a lot of different things going on. It made it very, uh, lively and, you know, but I finally, you know, I just said, I'll try to join the Peace Corps. And I said. And I thought it was risky then, because if the FBI had done its job, they might have considered me, uh, you know, somebody suspect.

NOBLE: [00:20:09] Because you'd been quite the activist. Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:20:12] Activist and living with my girlfriend and all these things. You just sort of like, all these things that were kind of problematic for. You know, what if your FBI agent was a, you know, Irish American graduate of Fordham and an absolute Catholic and didn't believe in anybody doing anything before they got married. And there you were. You were a sitting duck, right? So that's, uh, but so those were all the paranoias. And I think it was a very paranoid time, frankly.

NOBLE: [00:20:47] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:20:49] So, um, I got accepted, and, I don't know, maybe you had a question you wanted to ask.

NOBLE: [00:20:55] Well, yeah. Let's talk about that whole thing. So had you known other people who had joined the Peace Corps?

VINCENT: [00:21:01] Yes. Ironically, I began to explore what it would be like to be in the Peace Corps. And somebody gave me the name of David Schickele. And David Schickele was working for this filmmaker named John Korty, who's a filmmaker, David. He's no longer with us, sadly, but um.

NOBLE: [00:21:21] Yes, Peter Schickele's brother.

VINCENT: [00:21:22] Yes. Right. And, um, and David was also a very good musician, but as a filmmaker.

NOBLE: [00:21:28] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:21:29] And he had been, I don't know, I read some article by him, but he'd been in Nigeria. And ironically, I ended up going to the same place where he taught, and I went to visit him.

NOBLE: [00:21:42] Oh. Oh. How wonderful.

VINCENT: [00:21:44] And that made it very, yeah. He was working out at Stinson Beach as an editor on this film by John Korty.

NOBLE: [00:21:52] And how did, how did talking to David Schickele affect your views of what you were about to do?

VINCENT: [00:21:59] Well, he made it sound like fun.

NOBLE: [00:22:01] Okay.

VINCENT: [00:22:02] Well, you know, I was. He'd been very much involved with the English department. They were doing plays. They were doing all this interesting stuff. And he had traveled around Nigeria and he, uh. And it wasn't that, David wasn't political, but he, you know, he'd gone very early into the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:22:22] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:22:23] So, I don't know. So that was.

NOBLE: [00:22:25] And then he went back after Peace Corps.

VINCENT: [00:22:27] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:22:27] He made a film.

VINCENT: [00:22:28] Made a film, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:22:28] Or two.

VINCENT: [00:22:28] Yeah, he made the film. Yeah. The Left Hand Washes the Right, or I forget the name of the film, which was well done. And then.

NOBLE: [00:22:37] Give Me a Riddle.

VINCENT: [00:22:38] Was that what was it called? Give Me a Riddle.

NOBLE: [00:22:40] That was one. He made another one too.

VINCENT: [00:22:42] Yeah, Bushman.

NOBLE: [00:22:44] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:22:46] Which I'm in.

NOBLE: [00:22:46] Are you?

VINCENT: [00:22:47] A little bit.

NOBLE: [00:22:49] No kidding. Because by the time he went back to do his film, you were already a volunteer in Nigeria? Is that how you got in it?

VINCENT: [00:22:56] No. This was a feature film that he made later, Bushman.

NOBLE: [00:22:59] Oh.

VINCENT: [00:23:00] So it was made in the late '60s, about 1968.

NOBLE: [00:23:04] Oh, way after he got back.

VINCENT: [00:23:06] Yeah. But, you know.

NOBLE: [00:23:07] So we're getting ahead of ourselves. Um, when you were applying to the Peace Corps, did you, were you asked the question if you had any particular country that? Were there parts of the world that you would not want to go to?

VINCENT: [00:23:23] No. I think I could put, like Africa.

NOBLE: [00:23:26] That Africa would be a place you did want to go?

VINCENT: [00:23:28] Yes, yes.

NOBLE: [00:23:29] Yeah, yeah. And then they would say why?

VINCENT: [00:23:34] Um, I forget what I said.

NOBLE: [00:23:36] Yeah. But you were clear. You had it in mind that Africa was the place you wanted.

VINCENT: [00:23:40] Yeah. Yeah. I thought this was interesting, very. And Pan-Africanism. African nations becoming powers and. Uh. And I was interested in that because it became clear to me, maybe it was something I read, that a lot of the issues of race and power, which I was deeply conscious of, seemed to absolve once, in these African countries where Africans had power, that a lot of these issues dissipated.

NOBLE: [00:24:16] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [00:24:16] Obviously, there's still a lot of issues in Africa, but it's, but that in terms of personal relations, wasn't, um. If somebody had that kind of power, a lot of the stuff that comes up in typical American Black white relations.

NOBLE: [00:24:29] Yeah. It's not a factor.

VINCENT: [00:24:31] Not that much. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:24:32] No. What did your parents and your brothers think of your idea of going into the Peace Corps before you left?

VINCENT: [00:24:44] Oh, I, I don't. I don't think there, you know, there's a sense. I mean, I was at that age where I really, part of me didn't care what they thought. I knew what I had to do in order to.

NOBLE: [00:24:57] Yeah. You were, what, 23 or something?

VINCENT: [00:25:00] Yeah. When I went into the Peace Corps, I was 23.

NOBLE: [00:25:03] 23. Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:25:05] So I was free to make my own decisions.

NOBLE: [00:25:07] Of course. But they must, your parents would have expressed something.

VINCENT: [00:25:11] Well, I think my, uh, you know, my mother, like any parent, was in dread as to what I might be, that I would be at risk, you know, and some, somewhere or other that this would be dangerous. I mean, she had lost her brother in the war. And so da da da, there was that.

NOBLE: [00:25:27] So she'd be even more frightened if you were going into Vietnam, I suppose.

VINCENT: [00:25:31] Yeah. Well, I think, you know, I think she wanted me to become a political scientist and a professor and so forth, and this, you know. And here I was, the poet going off to Africa, albeit to become an English teacher and so forth, to become a professor. So it wasn't a total lose.

NOBLE: [00:25:53] So you, um, you get accepted.

VINCENT: [00:25:57] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:25:58] You're told you're going to Nigeria.

VINCENT: [00:25:59] Uh huh.

NOBLE: [00:26:02] And then you went into training?

VINCENT: [00:26:05] Yes. In Kalamazoo, Michigan.

NOBLE: [00:26:07] No kidding. Kalamazoo.

VINCENT: [00:26:10] Well, they had one professor there that had some expertise around maybe West Africa. And in those days, I'm sure for colleges anywhere, this was the Western Michigan University.

NOBLE: [00:26:23] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:26:24] These were big contracts, these Peace Corps training contracts. So they had a, um, vested interest in having. Colleges everywhere had a vested interest in having these programs to be, to host them, because they were profit centers.

NOBLE: [00:26:40] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:26:41] And so there we went to WMU, Western Michigan State, whatever it was, Michigan.

NOBLE: [00:26:48] University.

VINCENT: [00:26:50] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:26:51] Michigan State was up in East Lansing.

VINCENT: [00:26:53] Yes, yes. It wasn't. East Lansing was the co-host of where we went. They had the AID contract at the Institute, at the University of Nigeria. But in any case, so there I was. I think we started out with about a hundred people.

NOBLE: [00:27:09] Oh, that's a big group.

VINCENT: [00:27:10] It was a big group.

NOBLE: [00:27:11] And where are we now? In 1960, early '65? '64?

VINCENT: [00:27:15] Well, I. Early. Yeah, it's the summer of '65.

NOBLE: [00:27:19] Uh huh. Okay.

VINCENT: [00:27:21] And I go there and there's about 100 people. And it was curious. I think out of the hundred, I think 64 or so were from small colleges, often Catholic colleges or religious colleges.

NOBLE: [00:27:40] Huh.

VINCENT: [00:27:41] And then there were very small percentage of us who were from either the Bay Area or from New York or who had been kind of involved in a larger world.

NOBLE: [00:27:55] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:27:56] And from kids who were relatively unexposed to the world, you know. And so I think we were considered a little bit eccentric, odd, and not particularly, not dangerous in any way. But our worldviews were much larger than the people who came from these small colleges. And, but that's okay. That was just part of the world. But there we were there in Kalamazoo, which is like a, what, blue laws? I didn't know what a blue law was, but.

NOBLE: [00:28:30] What is a blue law?

VINCENT: [00:28:32] Blue laws are when you can't sell or buy liquor on Sundays. It's like all Dutch Reform, you know. You know, so it was very conservative.

NOBLE: [00:28:45] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [00:28:46] And so there we were. There we were. But you know, big, big dining halls with organs that played Liberace-like music and served steak that was three inches thick. It was a, that was it.

NOBLE: [00:29:06] Were all of you preparing yourselves to teach at a university?

VINCENT: [00:29:12] Oh, no.

NOBLE: [00:29:13] No?

VINCENT: [00:29:14] I was an exception.

NOBLE: [00:29:15] Uh huh. And what was their, were they all education people?

VINCENT: [00:29:19] A lot of them were education. I don't know if any, they weren't, it wasn't an ag group, it wasn't agriculture.

NOBLE: [00:29:25] No.

VINCENT: [00:29:25] This was all around education.

NOBLE: [00:29:27] Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:29:27] And so a lot of these, and we were all going all over Nigeria, which is a huge, huge place, as you know.

NOBLE: [00:29:34] Yeah, with many different languages. So how did they deal with language training?

VINCENT: [00:29:37] Oh, um. If we were going to the east, we had Igbo, learned Igbo. And there was Hausa.

NOBLE: [00:29:44] Hausa.

VINCENT: [00:29:45] Hausa. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:29:46] And some Yoruba?

VINCENT: [00:29:48] Yoruba. Yeah, sure. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:29:50] Do you remember who your, you, didn't we call them informants, the language trainers?

VINCENT: [00:29:56] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:29:57] The Nigerians who would be teaching.

VINCENT: [00:29:59] Oh, the Nigerians. I don't remember their names so much. I did, there was one person who did Yoruba. I had Agundape, who was from Abeokuta, and there were others, there were. But I don't remember the Igbo. And there were a couple of people. There was a couple. They were, they had religious backgrounds. They had learned their Igbo because they were there as.

NOBLE: [00:30:28] Missionaries.

VINCENT: [00:30:29] Missionary thing. So anyway, so I, you know, and I remember the two political scientists. It was kind of a hilarious experience being there.

NOBLE: [00:30:43] How many were in your language group, in your classes learning Igbo?

VINCENT: [00:30:46] Oh, I don't know. I'd say there were ten of us.

NOBLE: [00:30:49] Yeah. Ten maybe.

VINCENT: [00:30:50] Or 12, whatever.

NOBLE: [00:30:51] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:30:51] And you know, [speaks Igbo], you know.

NOBLE: [00:30:55] Right. Right, right.

VINCENT: [00:30:56] It's like that so.

NOBLE: [00:30:58] That you remember.

VINCENT: [00:30:59] Learning a little simple things. And unfortunately I never took to learning Igbo. There were some folks that did, that became very proficient in Igbo.

NOBLE: [00:31:09] Yeah, yeah. You were going, you were preparing yourself to, to be a lecturer at a university. And so I'm guessing that proficiency in Igbo wasn't going to be critical to your.

VINCENT: [00:31:20] No.

NOBLE: [00:31:20] Accomplishing what you had to do.

VINCENT: [00:31:23] Oh, it would have helped, you know, I mean, certainly to know any of those languages. And I learned, I mean, I became a little bit proficient in Pidgin by the time I was through.

NOBLE: [00:31:33] Yeah, yeah. But in training or by the time you were through with your?

VINCENT: [00:31:37] In, just in Nigeria.

NOBLE: [00:31:38] You picked up.

VINCENT: [00:31:39] I was very much in love with listening to Pidgin.

NOBLE: [00:31:42] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:31:42] It's a very lively language. And so, yeah, yeah, that was just the Peace Corps at that time. It was always remember they had, I don't know, was I interviewed or whatever? They had a couple of shrinks there.

NOBLE: [00:32:01] Oh, yeah. So this is part of the deselection thing, right?

VINCENT: [00:32:04] Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:32:05] When they were checking you out. And so you probably had to have a private interview with them.

VINCENT: [00:32:09] Yeah. I don't remember that interview. What I remember is that this, I don't know if one of the guys was Jewish and one wasn't, they were, but they were. You're in the Midwest. I mean, there was a whole shtick in the '50s after the war of assimilated Jews coming to the Midwest, you know, like to become shrinks and became very kind of WASPy, you know, very competent in terms of, you know. And so here we are, a group, just the guys. And their mission is to make sure that we behave. And so this was about our sexual behavior.

NOBLE: [00:32:53] Hmm.

VINCENT: [00:32:53] There were some assumptions that we weren't to have sex at all with Nigerians.

NOBLE: [00:32:59] Oh, they actually said this?

VINCENT: [00:33:01] Well, that was implicit, but more so, not even with our, the women in our group.

NOBLE: [00:33:09] You had to be, the assumption was you were to be celibate.

VINCENT: [00:33:12] You were to be chaste. Yes, yes, yes. And that was one of the more hilarious moments, which was this guy saying, well, I know if you feel like it, don't do it, you know.

NOBLE: [00:33:25] Just when the rest of the world was saying, if it feels good, do it.

VINCENT: [00:33:30] If, if you can, go run around the track. Or take up a hobby, time flies. I'll never forget this. And I said like this. You know, I said holy hell. So we listened. This was just very funny. And then the guy said, yes, and shaving lotion. Use your shaving lotion.

NOBLE: [00:34:00] What?

VINCENT: [00:34:00] For masturbation.

NOBLE: [00:34:01] Oh, for heaven's sakes.

VINCENT: [00:34:05] So this was, this was hilarious. This whole kind of thing. And it was, I mean, I just didn't quite, um. So there we are. It was, um. I mean, I don't know how much sex was going on in the Peace Corps training group, but a certain amount certainly was. But, uh.

NOBLE: [00:34:23] Your training group was a mixed group, right? You had men and women.

VINCENT: [00:34:26] Oh, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:34:26] Yeah, yeah. Were there some married couples in there too?

VINCENT: [00:34:29] Yeah. And, you know, one was, uh, the wife, they're from Yale. They were kind of preppies and, you know, Brooke was getting very involved with one of the language trainers, which I think finally broke the marriage apart. But anyway, so things, things happened.

NOBLE: [00:34:49] Things were happening in fact.

VINCENT: [00:34:50] Yes, yes, yes, yes. So it was, um. Anyway, I don't know if I'm going outside the boundaries of the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:34:56] Not at all. There are no boundaries. But let's, there's a little more to say about training, I think. In addition to language learning, what were you? What was your training talking about?

VINCENT: [00:35:09] Well, they gave lectures. And there was one guy on the, on the, the university staff who was very expert on Southeast Asia. And was it Colonel Giap? G-I-A-P?

NOBLE: [00:35:24] Hmm?

VINCENT: [00:35:24] Who knew the whole history there, military strategy and so forth, and loved to enact it. And which was kind of interesting just because here we were going off to Africa, and we had this guy who was expert on Southeast Asia and so forth.

NOBLE: [00:35:38] Yes, this is.

VINCENT: [00:35:39] And so, uh.

NOBLE: [00:35:40] Did he know something about West Africa too?

VINCENT: [00:35:42] Oh, nothing at all.

NOBLE: [00:35:43] Oh dear.

VINCENT: [00:35:44] Nobody did. Nobody did. Except this one guy.

NOBLE: [00:35:46] Really? You didn't have any Africanists there?

VINCENT: [00:35:48] One man. And I forget what his great gift and statement to the world of scholarship was, that was. But he was a scholar of some sort, and I don't know if it was about agriculture in West Africa or whatever. And the, you know, I mean, I remember this one couple. They were part of the trainers and there was a, I forget the names totally. Um. But it was a Caucasian couple, and he was a doctor, and his wife was. And they had a Black child. And they'd been in the Peace Corps. And she had clearly gotten involved with somebody, had a child when she was in the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:36:35] Who was their biological child or hers?

VINCENT: [00:36:38] Hers, not his.

NOBLE: [00:36:40] Ooh.

VINCENT: [00:36:40] And so this was kind of a mystery, how this all occurred. But nobody can ask those questions. But anyway.

NOBLE: [00:36:49] And they were among the, the staff, training staff?

VINCENT: [00:36:51] Yes, yes, yes, yes.

NOBLE: [00:36:53] Interesting.

VINCENT: [00:36:53] It was like funny.

NOBLE: [00:36:55] So you started out with a group of about 100 applicants and, or trainees rather. And that number probably dwindled down because there was deselection in those years.

VINCENT: [00:37:08] I think we lost about 20 or 25. That's my recollection.

NOBLE: [00:37:11] Where most of those asked to leave, or were there some who opted out of their own volition?

VINCENT: [00:37:16] I don't recollect, but I think many of them were asked to leave. I was, uh, at risk of being deselected. Not for any of the reasons I thought I could be deselected, because I thought, well, you know, you were terrified that there was going to be a report from the FBI.

NOBLE: [00:37:33] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:37:33] Whatever. And I, you know, we were witlessly, unwittingly. I don't know how much this happened in other programs, but we were given shots every week.

NOBLE: [00:37:46] Oh, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:37:47] Not realizing that this was just like they do with convicts in prison, you know, it was testing. They're testing out new vaccines and.

NOBLE: [00:37:55] Oh, no. Were they really?

VINCENT: [00:37:57] And one was a rabies vaccine. And they gave me this shot, and I began to stop breathing, you know. It was like. Fortunately, I found that they got some Benadryl into me. And so I was really, you know, close to going to the other, other side.

NOBLE: [00:38:16] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:38:16] And I was barking, coughing like a dog, you know.

NOBLE: [00:38:20] Oh, oh.

VINCENT: [00:38:20] And this was a new experience to me. And as it turned out, it was an anti-rabies vaccine that they were testing.

NOBLE: [00:38:27] And you were allergic.

VINCENT: [00:38:28] I was allergic to it. So first they were going to say that I couldn't go. I had to be, if I was going to Nigeria I had to be 75 or 70 miles away. 75 kilometers away from the nearest dog, in fear that there would be a rabid dog.

NOBLE: [00:38:42] You can't be 75 kilometers away from a dog.

VINCENT: [00:38:46] So I had to go back to my home and wait for a week.

NOBLE: [00:38:54] Now, wait. You completed the whole training program, right?

VINCENT: [00:38:56] Yeah. This is the last minute. They were, you know, the guillotine was going down, right?

NOBLE: [00:39:01] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:39:01] And so I had to go back home and wait until the verdict. And they let, let that go. I guess they decided if I was going to be teaching at a university campus, I was going to be okay.

NOBLE: [00:39:17] This didn't mean you were highly susceptible to a dog bite. It meant you were allergic to the vaccine, which is, the logic is a little flawed in there.

VINCENT: [00:39:26] Well, if I, if I got this vaccine that was still been tested, would it have worked anyway? But, uh, it was, it was bonkers. But sometimes things were bonkers in the Peace Corps. And things that came down from the top were often.

NOBLE: [00:39:42] Did they have other things coming down from the top about communism? Were you given lectures on American, American studies and anti-communism?

VINCENT: [00:39:52] I don't remember that. I mean, I would have really objected if that had been the case.

NOBLE: [00:39:57] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:39:58] No, I didn't. I don't recollect that at all.

NOBLE: [00:40:03] And the whole process of deselection. Were there, were there people in your group who found that objectionable?

VINCENT: [00:40:13] Well, I think it was uncomfortable for everybody, but the whole process.

NOBLE: [00:40:16] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:40:17] The mystery of it.

NOBLE: [00:40:18] Yeah. So people would just disappear from the group and you wouldn't know why?

VINCENT: [00:40:22] Well, no, it didn't happen until the end.

NOBLE: [00:40:24] Oh, the very end.

VINCENT: [00:40:25] Yeah. That's when you, you're going one way or the other.

NOBLE: [00:40:28] So at the, at the end, um, was there a swearing in ceremony?

VINCENT: [00:40:34] I don't recollect that at all.

NOBLE: [00:40:36] Uh huh. But you went home. Did everybody go home?

VINCENT: [00:40:38] Everybody went home.

NOBLE: [00:40:39] Yeah, for a couple of weeks, maybe?

VINCENT: [00:40:41] A week or so. And then we had to gather in New York for the plane.

NOBLE: [00:40:45] That's right, that's right.

VINCENT: [00:40:46] So it was, uh. The only thing I remember official was a bizarre experience, was they had a group come from the State Department, and there might have been a couple of officials. I don't remember them even talking to us. But they had interns, student interns that were with the State Department, and they were all preppies. And that just really irritated the hell out of me. And but they carried themselves like they were the owners and we were the, you know.

NOBLE: [00:41:19] Is this in New York when they?

VINCENT: [00:41:20] No, no, no, no. This is in Kalamazoo, they were visiting the, you know, it's a. Which I think if you're in Washington and places like that you're much more aware of is that a lot of people who work in various capacities in the, in the government, you know, Foreign Service and so forth, they come from these fairly privileged backgrounds often. And all the attitude that goes with it. So.

NOBLE: [00:41:45] And what was their role? What was their function?

VINCENT: [00:41:47] I think they were just examining the troops, my dear.

NOBLE: [00:41:52] Oh dear.

VINCENT: [00:41:54] It had that feel to it. I remember it was very strange. And here we are all listening to Bob Dylan, and all this stuff is going on in the South, and these people come and they look like they're, you know.

NOBLE: [00:42:06] Suits and ties.

VINCENT: [00:42:07] Feudal owners. Yeah, they're totally out of it, you know?

NOBLE: [00:42:09] Yeah. Yeah, yeah. As though they had some way of making decisions about who would be fit for Nigeria.

VINCENT: [00:42:16] Well, I don't know if they, I think they were just looking at a Peace Corps program. It was something to do, you know. I had no idea really.

NOBLE: [00:42:24] Who was president then? Johnson?

VINCENT: [00:42:28] Johnson.

NOBLE: [00:42:28] Johnson. Yeah. That's right.

VINCENT: [00:42:29] Hey hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?

NOBLE: [00:42:35] So you get on a plane. All, how many of you?

VINCENT: [00:42:39] Oh, pretty full plane, I guess it was 60, 70 people. And we got to Lagos and, um.

NOBLE: [00:42:46] Did you stop along the way?

VINCENT: [00:42:47] No, we were, I mean.

NOBLE: [00:42:49] It was non-stop?

VINCENT: [00:42:49] I think Sierra Leone.

NOBLE: [00:42:51] Sierra Leone.

VINCENT: [00:42:52] Yeah. Yeah, but we just changed planes. Same plane.

NOBLE: [00:42:56] Yeah. Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:42:57] And then we went on and, uh.

NOBLE: [00:43:00] So you get to Lagos and?

VINCENT: [00:43:02] And then we're, we stayed.

NOBLE: [00:43:03] Do you remember getting off the plane?

VINCENT: [00:43:05] We just stayed one night.

NOBLE: [00:43:07] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:43:07] In the dormitory. And then we were off to Enugu. And, um.

NOBLE: [00:43:14] So some of you went off to Enugu. Others of you went to?

VINCENT: [00:43:17] To Kano and.

NOBLE: [00:43:18] All over.

VINCENT: [00:43:18] All over the place. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:43:19] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:43:20] So it was, uh. And some I never saw again.

NOBLE: [00:43:23] Yeah. And so they didn't bring your whole group back together again for conferences or anything?

VINCENT: [00:43:30] No, no, but within in the, in the East, as it was then called, we, there were often conferences at the University of Nigeria.

NOBLE: [00:43:41] Okay, regional.

VINCENT: [00:43:41] Regional things.

NOBLE: [00:43:43] Peace Corps groups.

VINCENT: [00:43:43] Or in Enugu.

NOBLE: [00:43:44] So to get from Lagos to Enugu, you flew?

VINCENT: [00:43:48] Oh yeah.

NOBLE: [00:43:49] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:43:51] Or not oh yeah. But I mean, that was the way that.

NOBLE: [00:43:53] That was the way they, they got you there. Would have been a whole day's journey or more.

VINCENT: [00:43:59] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:44:00] On land. And so what was that like? You arrive in Enugu.

VINCENT: [00:44:05] Arrive in Enugu. And, uh, I always remember I get driven up, probably in a USAID truck or van.

NOBLE: [00:44:15] Which would have collected you at the airport?

VINCENT: [00:44:18] Yeah, I don't think, I don't know if we stayed. We might have stayed a day in Enugu because that's where the Peace Corps office was and the hostel and whatever.

NOBLE: [00:44:28] For the, for the eastern region.

VINCENT: [00:44:29] Yeah, Eastern region. I don't think it was a hostel really. But anyway, we were probably introduced.

NOBLE: [00:44:35] Might have been a hostel one.

VINCENT: [00:44:36] Yeah, I forget, I don't remember. No, there was one in Lagos, but I don't remember the one in Enugu. And then, uh, we went off to Enugu. And there were about 3 or 4 of us who were going to teach at Enugu.

NOBLE: [00:44:56] From your group?

VINCENT: [00:44:58] Uh, a couple from my group, yeah. Four or five. Yeah. And different things. Ironically, a couple, they weren't in my group, they came later, I went to high school with.

NOBLE: [00:45:14] No kidding!

VINCENT: [00:45:15] Martha and Jim.

NOBLE: [00:45:17] Oh my goodness. How likely is that?

VINCENT: [00:45:21] I wasn't saying we were good friends. And so I arrive, and there I am in. um. Do you want me to go on to say, or do you have a question?

NOBLE: [00:45:36] Let's talk. Yeah, talk about your arrivals. So you arrive at the university?

VINCENT: [00:45:40] Yeah, yeah. And so I'm taken to this, my housing, which is, you know, unlike 99 percent of other volunteers, it's, there's a series of buildings that each have apartments or flats. And so I'm.

NOBLE: [00:45:58] Pretty nice.

VINCENT: [00:45:59] Taken to my. Yes. You know, I'm taken to a flat, my bedroom, and I have a Peace Corps roommate who became, he's no longer with us, a friend for life. Daniel Gantz.

NOBLE: [00:46:08] He'd already been there?

VINCENT: [00:46:10] Yeah, he'd been there in the theater program.

NOBLE: [00:46:12] Oh, wonderful.

VINCENT: [00:46:13] And he was a wonderful character. He was Jewish, from the Bronx. And we, um. And his cousin was Allen Ginsberg. And so it was like all these stories would come out.

NOBLE: [00:46:29] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:46:30] And so that was good. But my first experience there, I had a headache. God knows why I had a headache. And so I said, can I get an aspirin? And he showed me the bottle of aspirin, and I took it out. And then I said, where's the, where can I get some water? And he says, oh, just. I turn around and there's Matthias, Matt, the houseboy, with a glass of water waiting for, to give me.

NOBLE: [00:47:02] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:47:02] And I said, holy shit.

NOBLE: [00:47:06] This is not the [inaudible] that maybe had crossed your mind.

VINCENT: [00:47:10] So was our cook and our, what a wonderful guy.

NOBLE: [00:47:15] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:47:15] My parting gift when he left was to give him my Honda, which I hoped that he would drive off because I, you know, we were very close to the, it was the first place that was captured by the federal troops.

NOBLE: [00:47:28] Because you're close to the northern region.

VINCENT: [00:47:30] Yeah, yeah. Plus it was the seat of the secession movement and so forth.

NOBLE: [00:47:34] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:47:35] Anyway, so that was, uh, part of my first day. And then, you know, going around, going to the.

NOBLE: [00:47:43] And this apartment is on the campus of the university?

VINCENT: [00:47:46] Yes. I'm raised up on a hill overlooking the valley.

NOBLE: [00:47:49] Yeah. How far is that from the city of Enugu?

VINCENT: [00:47:53] Oh, I think it was about an hour drive, if that. Not that far. But, you know, it's.

NOBLE: [00:48:00] North in the direction of the, north, the border?

VINCENT: [00:48:03] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:48:05] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:48:06] And So we were, yeah, close.

NOBLE: [00:48:10] So your apartment then had all the amenities. You had electricity?

VINCENT: [00:48:14] Oh, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:48:15] Maybe not reliable, but electricity.

VINCENT: [00:48:18] Yeah. It was reliable.

NOBLE: [00:48:20] Okay. Running water?

VINCENT: [00:48:22] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:48:24] Hot water?

VINCENT: [00:48:24] Hot water.

NOBLE: [00:48:25] Okay. A flush toilet?

VINCENT: [00:48:27] The whole thing.

NOBLE: [00:48:27] Ooh la. And you had a steward who cooked and cleaned for you, so you didn't have to spend time doing that. You could focus on your, your teaching.

VINCENT: [00:48:37] One of my traumatic experiences. Yes. Right. My, one of my traumatic experiences was I was, of course, having the. Remember that chart they gave you for culture shock and the different stages of culture shock? The Peace Corps provided it.

NOBLE: [00:48:50] I remember talk about culture shock. I don't remember the chart.

VINCENT: [00:48:53] You know, it would tell you what happens the first month or two months.

NOBLE: [00:48:55] And then the three month you crash.

VINCENT: [00:48:57] Yeah, right. So I was very much wanting to get my, uh, what was it I was waiting for? Did I have a trunk that was shipped or? I was getting a trunk full of books. I forget what it was.

NOBLE: [00:49:09] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [00:49:10] And or my books, you know, stuff that I had shipped. And I remember one day I was taking the, what do we call the siesta? The nap. And at that time, when I was living on the bottom floor and I thought I heard a van come in. And I just assumed that this van had my, my trunk.

NOBLE: [00:49:34] Yeah. A delivery.

VINCENT: [00:49:34] And I, and I was, and they wouldn't. I'd be asleep and I wouldn't be able to, and it wouldn't be delivered. So I want to get out of bed as fast as I can. And the bed is made so well, all the sheets are cornered all kind of halfway up the side.

NOBLE: [00:49:55] Ah, yeah.

VINCENT: [00:49:56] And so I'm trying to leap out of bed and I go, and this bed is up about 2.5 feet or whatever. I go out at a horizontal because I couldn't. And then just fell right down on my hip. I had the most bruised hip for the next two months, three months. It was just terrible.

NOBLE: [00:50:12] Oh, what a, what a beginning.

VINCENT: [00:50:14] Yeah. Well, that was part of the beginning.

NOBLE: [00:50:16] And was your trunk indeed in that van? Was it there?

VINCENT: [00:50:19] No, no. Somebody had driven up into the driveway, and it was like, there were other, lots of other apartments there. It was just totally, whatever. But that was my, uh, that was my beginning there. Yeah. Getting used to it, going. I went, I was given a Honda Subrosa from a previous volunteer.

NOBLE: [00:50:43] How big?

VINCENT: [00:50:44] Oh, it was Honda 50.

NOBLE: [00:50:46] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:50:46] The smallest size. Yeah. So I and Dan went over to the rest house for, I don't think it was for lunch, just to get a beer.

NOBLE: [00:50:58] Can you describe for whoever's listening to this what a rest house is?

VINCENT: [00:51:01] Oh, a rest house is a, uh, it's a place where, they're all over Nigeria, where people. It's like a hotel, a service bed and breakfast, and has a, has a bar and I, um.

NOBLE: [00:51:16] And the guests would be Nigerians or expats?

VINCENT: [00:51:21] Anybody. Yeah. They were just what we called roadhouse or something like that. And, uh, so I went there and I remember having Star beer for the first time, and we drank two bottles of it each. Whatever.

NOBLE: [00:51:41] These are big bottles.

VINCENT: [00:51:42] Big bottles.

NOBLE: [00:51:43] It's not like a little 12 ounce.

VINCENT: [00:51:44] Right. And then get on this Honda and somehow getting back. But I remember lying down and the stars were twisting throughout. Just totally, totally bombed, you know? And probably wasn't the last time I got bombed in Nigeria, but it was definitely a note of caution as to what could happen if you drank too much Sta beer.

NOBLE: [00:52:04] Too much and then get on your motorcycle.

VINCENT: [00:52:05] Yeah, not a good idea. So that was, um.

NOBLE: [00:52:09] And what would be, before we leave your dwelling place and get into your classroom, what? What were you eating?

VINCENT: [00:52:18] Oh, I was actually trying to remember. It was a little bit static. We always had, what's it called? Fufu. It's a pounded yam and the hot sauce.

NOBLE: [00:52:31] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [00:52:31] The university had access to, um, was it Obudu? The ranch that was on the edge of the Cameroons, Ogoja and Ogoja province? It was a up, it was very close to Cameroon. It was a mountain that had this ranch where they raised pigs and cattle and what have you. And so that was the source of meats, very good meat supply. So we'd have pork and we'd have chicken. A lot of chicken, a lot of chicken. And of course, in the morning there was always cereal of one sort or other that was, you know, the kind of cereals you can get probably anywhere in the world these days. Just bran cereals.

NOBLE: [00:53:17] Milk?

VINCENT: [00:53:20] There was some kind of milk. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:53:21] There was?

VINCENT: [00:53:22] Yeah. We were treated well, my dear.

NOBLE: [00:53:25] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:53:26] And it was, you know, it was kind of a wealth of embarrassments, you know. And then, I mean, that was a whole complication of, as you say, going into the classroom. At that time, I don't know what it's like now. There have been so many changes in Nigeria. But if you had a position in a university that was like not that much different than having a government appointment in a high office. This was all, after all they'd been through politically and everything, to be 23 years old and be coming from this very, uh, what shall we say, dramatic political environment. And then coming into this situation where I suddenly was elevated into this status that was totally unfamiliar to me as a, as a style and so forth.

NOBLE: [00:54:18] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:54:20] I don't want to say it was like really British, but it definitely had elements.

NOBLE: [00:54:24] Of course.

VINCENT: [00:54:24] Of that.

NOBLE: [00:54:24] Sure.

VINCENT: [00:54:25] So that was, so I was. You can only imagine when I left Nigeria, there was like a dramatic crash coming, coming off this position, being very privileged.

NOBLE: [00:54:38] Yes.

VINCENT: [00:54:38] In a way. And so where I was a lecturer and had this power and what have you, which wasn't. I'd just been a graduate student and got kind of thrown into this, you know.

NOBLE: [00:54:54] And you were being addressed as sir, right?

VINCENT: [00:54:57] Oh, I forget what I was addressed for, but it's just how you were looked upon. And essentially, you were, not to degrade what I was doing, but you were part of a meal ticket. In other words, it was very important for people to do well at the university and, you know, determine their, their fate in the future, you know?

NOBLE: [00:55:19] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:55:19] So it was like that. But I don't mean to put the onus on me as a overprivileged white guy from California in this circumstance but, because the teaching experience was extraordinary.

NOBLE: [00:55:34] Well, let's talk about that.

VINCENT: [00:55:35] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:55:36] What do you mean when you say the teaching experience was extraordinary?

VINCENT: [00:55:39] What do I mean? Well, I, um, was teaching humanities, creative writing, introduction to literature. And first off, I should say the University of Nigeria, 65 percent of the staff at that time was African.

NOBLE: [00:55:56] Ah.

NOBLE: [00:55:58] And so it was not a, um, was. And the head of the department was African and so on and so forth. So I was in the English department, and I had these wonderful colleagues who also had various political backgrounds, various family backgrounds, you know, often of privilege. And so they had had very good educations in Nigeria before they'd gone abroad to get their PhDs and, uh.

NOBLE: [00:56:35] When you say gone abroad from the eastern region, was that usually to America or to England?

VINCENT: [00:56:41] Or they've been to, often to America. They kind of like Obi Wali had gone to the Northwestern. Some of them had gone to Leeds and or had gone to Canada, which had good programs for, you know, folks doing English, reading English, as they say.

NOBLE: [00:56:57] Ah, yes.

VINCENT: [00:56:58] And so that was, um, interesting. That and I became very close with a number of them. And so I, uh, I don't know exactly how to explore this other than to say that there I was teaching literature. And I remember the second year, which was kind of exciting, teaching things like *The Great Gatsby*.

NOBLE: [00:57:32] Did you get to choose the books or?

VINCENT: [00:57:34] No, the department chose.

NOBLE: [00:57:36] Okay.

VINCENT: [00:57:37] And so, and this is still close to the '50s. They had, like there was the angry young, angry men, angry young men? The British novelists,

I forget their names now. They were kind of in vogue at the time. And The Great Gatsby. And then, um, no longer. What is the second Achebe book?

NOBLE: [00:57:58] No Longer at Ease?

VINCENT: [00:57:59] No Longer at Ease. So it was a mix of African. And so it was just great because it brought up lots of conversations with the students. And I should say, the students at this university, it was built on the, um. Azik, Azikiwe [Nnamdi Azikiwe] was very familiar with the University of Michigan and the land grant. So it was set up as a land grant college. Part of the mission was to train teachers.

NOBLE: [00:58:30] You're talking about Nsukka now?

VINCENT: [00:58:31] Nsukka, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:58:32] Yeah.

VINCENT: [00:58:33] So there were, um. So there were a lot of students who most of them were my age there from the bush. They were not, um. It wasn't until after [Chukwuemeka Odumegwu] Ojukwu determined that the students should come back from all the other universities. I don't know if you remember this, but they were, um, after negotiations broke down after the pogroms in the north, all that, he was already there. This whole secession thing was.

NOBLE: [00:59:08] Brewing.

VINCENT: [00:59:08] Brewing, right. And so people who, students who had been in the second year, who had been in very privileged universities, they'd been at Ibadan, they had a pretty high opinion of themselves. And Nsukka was considered like going to San Francisco State instead of going to the University of California.

NOBLE: [00:59:29] Oh, really? So Ibadan was held in much greater esteem.

VINCENT: [00:59:32] Oh, yeah. Yeah. And that's where people like Willie Soyinka and J.P. Clark and a lot of the intellectuals, the cream of the cream, had gone to school. So going to Nsukka was like, like with resentment, you know, that they had given up something.

NOBLE: [00:59:53] And did they wind up as students in your class?

VINCENT: [00:59:55] Oh, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:59:55] Some of these?

VINCENT: [00:59:56] Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. That was the second year. And so that was. And that created an interesting rife-ness, rife-ness, you know, with the students from the bush and those who were, had a high opinion of themselves and so forth. So there was a lot of.

NOBLE: [01:00:16] Well, what about ability? Were the students from the bush able to read and analyze literature right up there with the more privileged students?

VINCENT: [01:00:27] Well, I think it just took a while for, certainly, certainly. I mean, I can't think of examples right now, but some of my colleagues were from kind of bush. They were just diamonds in the rough, you know, and they didn't come from privileged families so.

NOBLE: [01:00:44] But they could think.

VINCENT: [01:00:45] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it's, uh. So but in terms of teaching, I was just. All kinds of experiences which fed my writing, you know, it's like. And because I was dealing with creative writing, so I really got very immersed and elicited stories about, you know, the local village life, the witchcraft, all this stuff. And I had friends who, there was a student there who's actually become quite well known as a scholar of art, Babatunde Lawal, who was Yoruba, and he would ride around with his bike, always had his, with a binder like this. He was always writing a novel.

NOBLE: [01:01:33] Now wait, he's Yoruba but he's at Nsukka?

VINCENT: [01:01:36] Yeah, this is the first year. He left.

NOBLE: [01:01:38] And then he left.

VINCENT: [01:01:39] When he graduated.

NOBLE: [01:01:39] Yeah. Okay.

VINCENT: [01:01:41] And, uh, we had always stopped by and he wouldn't even read from the book. He would just enact what was going on in the novel. Come by after lunch. And I'd say, Tunde, don't you think you should just write it down? If you keep speaking it, you'll, you know, they'll riff. If you keep talking it, you won't be able to write it. And he says, no, this is the third time today and it keeps getting better. But he was full of, of course, in those days. Amos Tutuola, the Palm-Wine Drinkard. This whole world of the underworld of spirits was very in vogue then among some, you know, the educated Nigerians didn't want to have. They had left the bush. They didn't want to hear about it anymore.

NOBLE: [01:02:27] They didn't think that was literature.

VINCENT: [01:02:29] Well, yeah, there was vernacular. And so all that stuff was going on. And but, you know, when we get into, you know, as students from very conservative backgrounds and, you know, in a novel when somebody, uh, always put me in a funny position because, uh. I was just reading in my journal about Daisy and The Great Gatsby.

NOBLE: [01:02:58] Gatsby, mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:02:59] And how she has, I mean, she's a modern woman and she's, I forget what she's doing. But, you know, some students are just totally unaccepting. How can you accept that? You know, they're very, you know, moralistic about how somebody should behave. Or marriages, why the older brother can't choose who you're going to marry, and all this stuff would come up.

NOBLE: [01:03:24] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:03:24] And so, you know, I'd always say, well, in my experience or what I know or somewhere else. I didn't want to get into, you know, I shied away from getting into arguments over about behavior.

NOBLE: [01:03:41] Yes. Or one culture's values as opposed to another.

VINCENT: [01:03:44] Yeah. I just was intrigued all the time.

NOBLE: [01:03:47] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [01:03:48] And so, uh.

NOBLE: [01:03:49] How many kids would you have? I'm calling them kids, but how many, how many students would you have in any given class?

VINCENT: [01:03:54] Between 20 and 30.

NOBLE: [01:03:56] Okay, that sounds manageable.

VINCENT: [01:03:56] Well, some of the creative writing could be small, like 6 or 8. And, um, so.

NOBLE: [01:04:03] Boy, what a luxury to have a class of 6 or 8 students.

VINCENT: [01:04:06] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:04:06] Wow.

VINCENT: [01:04:06] They were, yeah, great. Just a lot of good things happened.

NOBLE: [01:04:10] Have you ever stood in front of the classroom before?

VINCENT: [01:04:13] Oh, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:04:13] You had?

VINCENT: [01:04:14] I had done student teaching as, in my graduate program.

NOBLE: [01:04:17] Ah, okay. So this wasn't totally new.

VINCENT: [01:04:20] Yeah. And I had done poetry in the schools, which was another program.

NOBLE: [01:04:24] Okay. So you had some idea of.

VINCENT: [01:04:26] Yeah. But I liked doing it.

NOBLE: [01:04:28] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:04:29] I liked being in the role of the teacher.

NOBLE: [01:04:33] And then when you'd come home in the evenings, did you have a whole lot of? Uh, did you have to spend hours preparing for the next day?

VINCENT: [01:04:41] I managed not to, you know.

NOBLE: [01:04:44] You had some papers to do.

VINCENT: [01:04:46] I'd prepare and read papers and so forth. And you know, I never came directly home. I was, I and Daniel Gantz were the coaches of the women's basketball team, and so I had that. And of course, we all were gin and tonic buffs at the end of the day. And there was a, let's see, what do they call it? The Continuing Education Center had a bar, so we'd hang out with people and talk. And of course, as the war became more imminent, it became, these became very important zones in which to talk, or eventually not to talk if you were opposed to the secession, which I was, you know.

NOBLE: [01:05:25] Yeah. And so some of the eastern Nigerians would have been pro secession and others would have seen it coming and thought it was a bad idea.

VINCENT: [01:05:34] Oh, yeah. I was a very mixed, a very mixed group. But the, basically the secessionists were in charge, especially in the last year once Ojukwu called people home and, uh. So when people came back, we also got new staff. Among my staff was Ken Saro-Wiwa, and I was good friends with him.

NOBLE: [01:06:08] Huh.

VINCENT: [01:06:08] And he was a very good writer and wrote lots of plays and was constantly working. And he and then another fellow, Obi Wali, who was from the rivers, was a good friend. He had been to, he was a PhD from Northwestern, a very political Marxist, had been on panels with Malcolm X, and so it was like. And then my friend Peter. God, I forget Peter's last name, how to pronounce it. Anyway, he was from Ogoja. And these were people who came from families that were powerful in those regions. And they had long, long issues with Igbos, and they didn't, um, buy this at all.

NOBLE: [01:06:57] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:06:58] And so they were, uh, Obi became, Obi was involved with the first coup as a writer and writing documents and so forth. He described to me how he had, when the first coup lasted, I think it lasted more than a day before it began to be [Johnson Aguiyi] Ironsi and different people. I don't know all the details, but they.

NOBLE: [01:07:24] Yeah. But the, the first coup we might explain here was January of 1966.

VINCENT: [01:07:31] Yes. Yes. And so.

NOBLE: [01:07:33] And in which, who overthrew whom?

VINCENT: [01:07:36] Right. Well, in 1966, it was a radical coup with a lot of young officers and other people, like my friend Obi, who had constructed a vision of Nigeria that would eliminate corruption and all these things. But in the process of the coup, they killed some very important northern Hausa

leaders, and they, um. So it was very, this didn't go on for long. I mean, they thought, like a lot of romantics, that if you had a coup and got rid of the leadership and declared your intentions that the people would follow.

NOBLE: [01:08:23] Yes, and everything would be fine.

VINCENT: [01:08:25] Fine, yeah. Well, the people, when the coup happened, the campus was just in heaven.

NOBLE: [01:08:31] Of course, because the new leader of Nigeria now is an Igbo.

VINCENT: [01:08:35] Well, that wasn't so much known at the time.

NOBLE: [01:08:38] It wasn't? Huh.

VINCENT: [01:08:39] The leader was Ironsi. And Ironsi was not God's gift to anything really. I mean, he was.

NOBLE: [01:08:45] He was a general.

VINCENT: [01:08:46] Yeah. And, uh, but the, uh, the vision there was attractive to young people, all the corruption. And it was ironic because my, members of the English staff, they had, some of them had parents who were chiefs. [inaudible] and they were all arrested. And so this left them looking in a very funny position, right? To have their parents, I mean, made divided because they were like traditionally very much in support of their parents, as you know, kind of was filial. Filial?

NOBLE: [01:09:27] Yeah, filial ties, obligations, respect, all of that.

VINCENT: [01:09:31] All that. So anyway, that quickly changed. I remember that we were having a. My class, my English class, were having a party in my. At that time, my flat had moved up to the top of the building with a great view, and we could see all the demonstrations going on. I mean, people walking and celebrating. And we were having this party and everybody was just happy. And, uh, then came the pogrom. The killings.

NOBLE: [01:10:06] Up in the northern region?

VINCENT: [01:10:08] North. Yeah. And that changed.

NOBLE: [01:10:10] So this was largely retribution, I suppose, right?

VINCENT: [01:10:13] Yeah. Um. Well, it was retribution against the Igbos and all these towns up there where the Igbos had positions in the civil service. They had shops. They were given all the stereotypes that are given to Jews and traditionally so. And so they began getting killed.

NOBLE: [01:10:36] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:10:38] And coming south.

NOBLE: [01:10:40] Trains with bodies on them.

VINCENT: [01:10:41] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So.

NOBLE: [01:10:44] End of euphoria.

VINCENT: [01:10:46] Right. Exactly. It was really. And then the beginning of paranoia on the campus. The minority students felt very vulnerable.

NOBLE: [01:11:01] Now, minority students in this context meant non Igbo?

VINCENT: [01:11:04] Non Igbos, yeah. The people who were from the rivers, the people who were, you know, Ijaw rivers people. I forget, I'm thinking of, oh, what's the name of that?

NOBLE: [01:11:20] Ikwerre?

VINCENT: [01:11:20] Yeah, quite, quite a number.

NOBLE: [01:11:22] Yes.

VINCENT: [01:11:23] Remember, there's 250 language groups.

NOBLE: [01:11:25] Right, right, right.

VINCENT: [01:11:27] I remember that from Peace Corps training.

NOBLE: [01:11:29] Mutually unintelligible languages.

VINCENT: [01:11:33] So I'm just trying to gather my thoughts here, but. So it was.

NOBLE: [01:11:39] Did the, did those minority students, those non Igbo students at this predominantly Igbo university stick around or did they go home?

VINCENT: [01:11:47] Some left. And some of them, just a lot of people were just terrified of what might happen to them and their families and so forth. And so I remember once, as the war got closer, I remember one. he was a clerk actually, he was from, uh, he was Efik. Efik. And we were kind of friends, you know, it was like out of Achebe, the guy who rides around with a bike with a tie that's flying over his shoulder.

NOBLE: [01:12:12] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:12:12] And he said, I have, you know, 200 pounds, which was a lot of money for a clerk to have saved. And he wanted me to take it to America to protect it.

NOBLE: [01:12:28] Oh my goodness.

VINCENT: [01:12:28] You know, it was that kind of scare.

NOBLE: [01:12:31] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:12:31] So I didn't, but I, uh, but it kind of gave me the notion. But then I had just had people, as the. I'm skipping over things that should be probably given much more detail. We don't have time for today. That would, uh, just lost my train of thought here for a second. Oh, come back, come back. Um. But in any case, the fear was great. The stories and the, you know, and that created a lot of fear. And there were some arrests.

NOBLE: [01:13:11] Oh, arrests on campus?

VINCENT: [01:13:12] Yeah, yeah. Helicopter arrived and two people in the journalism department, or one person in the journalism department disappears.

NOBLE: [01:13:21] Faculty?

VINCENT: [01:13:22] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So things were not kind.

NOBLE: [01:13:26] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:13:27] And so the people on the faculty among the minorities had to be very quiet.

NOBLE: [01:13:34] Yeah. How did that affect Americans on the faculty?

VINCENT: [01:13:40] Well, I mean, some of us were very concerned. But again, we're dealing with, who knows. It's [like] Michigan State University. It's an agricultural campus, but they're providing staff for humanities and other departments. And they have all of the, on one level, innocence of Americans to kind of oblivious to what's going on maybe, or not involved. While at the same time there's an article, an essay in Ramparts about Michigan State University training the police in Vietnam, you know, so. And we don't know who. And we weren't of that kind of consciousness much, of who on the MSU staff was CIA. And undoubtedly some were. And we often wondered, like when somebody went in the economics department in American, went and traveled around all these markets and did, you know, research, you know, ostensibly about economies of markets, whether they were doing other kinds of research.

NOBLE: [01:14:49] Did they have some other questions too?

VINCENT: [01:14:51] Other agendas? Yes, yes. They're checking out things and checking out military and what have you. Yeah. So, um.

NOBLE: [01:14:59] Did you ever wonder whether there were people among your Peace Corps group who were actually working for the CIA?

VINCENT: [01:15:04] I only had a suspicion about one guy, and there might have been others, but he was. I sound, I sound like I have issues. I'm, what am I? Part of me is Scots-Irish, Protestant, not particularly favorable to the Papal, the Pope, and the, um. So the guy who graduated from, who was from Fordham, he seemed a little bit ambiguous to me.

NOBLE: [01:15:35] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:15:35] He might have had another agenda going, but it just might have been an All-American pro jock, you know? I don't know what his real thing was, but it gave me cause to wonder. I always said things that were very pro-American around him, so I provide my cover.

NOBLE: [01:15:54] But did he wind up in Nsukka with you?

VINCENT: [01:15:57] No, no, no. I forget where he went.

NOBLE: [01:15:58] Yeah. Anyway. We're digressing.

VINCENT: [01:16:01] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:16:02] But anyway, uh, so the teaching was really phenomenal. I'm still, uh, I had a poetry group, and those guys there, I don't think they're long for the world, some of them. But they were very active as poets. They were very active as poets during the war. They would just send me reams of poetry.

NOBLE: [01:16:23] Your students?

VINCENT: [01:16:24] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:16:24] Yeah. So they would send you reams. You mean after you came home?

VINCENT: [01:16:29] No, no, during the war. Because they would, some of them were in the, uh, I should say Foreign Service. They were traveling and giving speeches in favor of Biafra. So I would get these packets of poems.

NOBLE: [01:16:43] Oh. Uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:16:43] As well as letters and so forth. So. And I would get letters from Ken Saro-Wiwa and Obi Wali. I was getting it from all sides, you know, because my students really never knew my feelings about secession.

NOBLE: [01:16:56] You kept that quiet.

VINCENT: [01:16:57] Yeah. Because they were, um, you know, we were doing poetry and not.

NOBLE: [01:17:02] This was not a political science class.

VINCENT: [01:17:05] Well, I don't know. I just realized it was super touchy, and I didn't want to.

NOBLE: [01:17:09] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:17:09] I mean, I was, that's that ambivalence you have or ambiguity when you're in the Peace Corps and you're a guest of this country. And at the same time, I was getting very, very involved and very passionate about what was going on politically, because that's what I come from.

NOBLE: [01:17:26] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:17:26] And I could see, I knew this secession thing was going to be suicidal. I mean, I mean, you didn't have to read very big tea leaves to know that, you know.

NOBLE: [01:17:37] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:17:38] And so I was, I kept, um. You know, I was. And plus we just had good friendships and so I didn't. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:17:49] So it sounds to me like you had some, um, very deep and solid friendships with Nigerians.

VINCENT: [01:17:56] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:17:57] As well as you talked about your, your Peace Corps roommate being a lifelong friend, you.

VINCENT: [01:18:02] Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:18:02] So when you would socialize, those gin and tonics, who were you drinking with?

VINCENT: [01:18:07] Oh, we'd have, I mean, this guy I know as the war approached, what was his name? Ben somebody. He was very much into building bombs and, and he was very much like a stereotypical Igbo that we have the intellectual capacity to do things that the enemy can't.

NOBLE: [01:18:30] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:18:30] And so he was involved in creating weaponry.

NOBLE: [01:18:34] In your poetry class?

VINCENT: [01:18:36] No, no, he's on staff.

NOBLE: [01:18:38] Faculty? Okay.

VINCENT: [01:18:39] He was on the physics. Physics. Yeah. So he, uh. I don't know, sometimes it's just kind of hilarious stuff in the sense of. Azikiwe had a son. I don't know if he's still alive or not. Azikiwe's son basically worked for his mom, who was a very strong lady who had this whole, she had the food concession at the university.

NOBLE: [01:19:04] Oh.

VINCENT: [01:19:05] A little nepotism of sorts. You know, eggs and so forth for the cafeteria, all that stuff. And he was involved in administering that, delivering the eggs. I don't know what he was doing. And he'd grown up in England and educated in England. And, you know, I remember him. One day we were talking and he was talking about his nanny and growing up and his mom, and he'd say something. You know, if you gave me a rifle, I would shoot my mother first.

NOBLE: [01:19:39] Oh. Gosh.

VINCENT: [01:19:44] So I was, you know, I mean, he was the one, you know, but it was very. But that was over, you know, in the bar.

NOBLE: [01:19:53] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:19:54] At the university. But it was just, you know, a little funny at times. But anyhow, so we, we had a, you know, I forget, you know, a lot of us sometimes we were just playing tennis. That was my other introduction to the English, playing tennis on the clay courts with the three, quote unquote, piccaninnies at each end. And if the ball went that way or that way, they would immediately deliver you the ball to, to serve or whatever. And I realized that this was really what colonialism was, is like having to exert the least amount of energy, doing trivial stuff, you know, to have it be served. And I was, I always found it bizarre. I didn't think it was my privilege to have somebody else chase the ball.

NOBLE: [01:20:45] Chase the ball for you.

VINCENT: [01:20:46] Of course, it was the tropics. I didn't object, finally. But, you know, it was hot. So anyway. But I had, um. I remember I had an experience where, I was just reading about it in my journal the other day. I had contracted with the Peace Corps to be able to, since I had a lot of the staff was also, were also poets, these Nigerians, or had a deep interest in poetry. And especially there was a lot of poetry written after, before and after independence as part of the whole, uh, emergence. And so I created it. I wanted to create this project where we would make tapes, cassettes.

NOBLE: [01:21:35] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:21:35] Of these guys reading poems by others, you know, that were in anthologies and so forth. And that these would become available in the classrooms all over the East. And so that part went well. And then since I had a grant from the Peace Corps, at the end of the tape I acknowledged the gift of the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [01:22:03] Ah.

VINCENT: [01:22:05] Absolute rage that I hadn't told them it was the Peace Corps. This is all involved in nationalism, colonialism. The whole idea that they were being.

NOBLE: [01:22:18] And the rage was coming from the?

VINCENT: [01:22:19] Nigerians.

NOBLE: [01:22:20] Nigerian poets?

VINCENT: [01:22:22] Yeah. Or the staff that had asked to read.

NOBLE: [01:22:25] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:22:25] They were all in favor of the program, but the whole idea that.

NOBLE: [01:22:28] That you mentioned the funding.

VINCENT: [01:22:29] That I acknowledged the Peace Corps as a supporter, they didn't. That was like getting tarred, you know. And so it was, uh, you know.

NOBLE: [01:22:38] There's an unexpected flap.

VINCENT: [01:22:39] I hadn't, I hadn't even paid them, you know, from this fund that had supported the buying of the tapes. It wasn't very much money, mind you. But I hadn't asked for money, which now I would if somebody was going to read on such a thing, I'd actually pay them. But, um.

NOBLE: [01:22:55] But it was to buy your materials and equipment.

VINCENT: [01:22:58] Yeah, yeah. And, um, so I. That, that kind of a serious division between me and a couple of the people on the staff who took very strong exception to.

NOBLE: [01:23:12] Would they, were they objecting to the, the financial contribution of the United States Peace Corps to this project or that?

VINCENT: [01:23:23] The identification of the project with the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [01:23:25] Okay. And you mentioning that.

VINCENT: [01:23:27] You've got to mention that this is like 1965, '66. This is right after independence.

NOBLE: [01:23:32] Yes.

VINCENT: [01:23:32] And kind of letting, not wanting to have those kinds of associations be so transparent or whatever. Yeah, I was just reading that. Where did my glasses go?

NOBLE: [01:23:44] You had them in your hand.

VINCENT: [01:23:46] Right there.

NOBLE: [01:23:46] They're there.

VINCENT: [01:23:47] I was just seeing this. It's fresh on my mind because I was seeing this letter. Where is it?

NOBLE: [01:23:57] So you're opening up one of the journals. So these are the journals that you were keeping while you were?

VINCENT: [01:24:02] Yeah. And these are plastic notebooks of the time that the students would have.

NOBLE: [01:24:06] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:24:07] And let's see if I, um.

NOBLE: [01:24:14] Are these books that you would have purchased in Nigeria?

VINCENT: [01:24:17] Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:24:18] The blank books?

VINCENT: [01:24:19] Yeah. They're line books.

NOBLE: [01:24:21] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:24:22] Like this is. Uh. But anyway, I have a letter from Michael Echeru, you know, kind of demonstrating his in a very, whatever manner is, is trying to explain why I caused this fracas. And, uh.

NOBLE: [01:24:55] How deep into your two years was that?

VINCENT: [01:24:59] Uh, that was kind of relatively early, I think. Here it is. I'll just read the first few lines, which is, I think it's this.

NOBLE: [01:25:10] 1966?

VINCENT: [01:25:12] Yeah. June 22nd, 1966.

NOBLE: [01:25:17] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:25:17] And it's actually a compassionate letter. "We are all getting on one another's nerves in the English department these days, aren't we? Let me first thank you for your letter and express my sincere." I had written a letter. "That my remarks to Mrs. Wilmer should have caused you the pains you report in your letter. The truth, quite frankly, Steve, is that the, quote, continued ineptness of the administration to choose a real head of the department, combined with the Monroe Act, which plus the Nigerian

memorandum on Monroe's, have not in any way contributed to what you now describe as the bitterness and the prejudice and the present situation." Those were other events. "The facts are these. I met Kalu and Joan talking about the recordings, these tapes, and joined in the discussion because I was interested in it. My objections can be stated quite clearly to you."

VINCENT: [01:26:10] "First, that you seem not to be aware of the possibility of these tapes being prepared without remuneration to the readers or the accreditation to the Peace Corps constituting an embarrassing matter. It was my impression that most of us felt you were genuinely interested in the project as a main interest in poetry, but I express my opinion that I have never held, had loyalty to institutions, but loyalty to ideals, and that personally I would have been constrained to ask that my name be dropped from the list were I in the original reading panel. This is a strong opinion. I remarked also that with regard to the present series of recordings we are doing for the NBC [Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation], we would hate to feel we were doing so for the Regional Ministry of Education." Et cetera, et cetera. But you get the idea that the Peace Corps was not exactly something that they wanted to have their names associated with.

NOBLE: [01:27:10] And yet they were happy to accept you as a faculty member.

VINCENT: [01:27:13] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's ideals, right? And ideals as a person. So yeah, my rapport was good. But then when I said I was doing it under the cover of the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [01:27:22] Yeah, that was something else.

VINCENT: [01:27:24] All hell broke loose. Yes, yes, yes, yes. So.

NOBLE: [01:27:26] Image.

VINCENT: [01:27:27] Yeah. Yeah. And so that was like just one example. But, uh. No, but I had a great time. One of the faculty members, Peter, um, what's his? Obong. Peter Obong. He was from the Ogoja, and he had a project

that I asked to participate in or invited me to participate in, which was doing oral histories in his, uh, among his people, among his people at the time. But in any case. So I spent part of a summer with him out in Ogoja recording.

NOBLE: [01:28:06] This is during a school break?

VINCENT: [01:28:08] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:28:08] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:28:08] Summer. As we'd say, summer vacation. So we were recording everything from elegies to birth songs to. And going all over the place.

NOBLE: [01:28:17] How wonderful.

VINCENT: [01:28:17] Oh, it was incredible. And war songs and all of these things. And then also, uh, the troubadours. He was a politician. So the, the guys that accompanied him when he went from village to village to run for office.

NOBLE: [01:28:35] Mm hmm.

VINCENT: [01:28:35] They would sing praise songs for Peter.

NOBLE: [01:28:39] Oh.

VINCENT: [01:28:39] And then they'd also sing praise songs for themselves, which were great, you know. And the lines that appeal to me, just given my kind of class awareness, was like, uh, "gentility without ability calls me a" whatever it was, you know, in other words, they were very conscious of when you're out there in the bush, you know, there are people that do have cars there and money and power and you're just, you know, the guy who washes the car, that's. All this stuff would come out.

NOBLE: [01:29:15] And this was, these songs would be in English?

VINCENT: [01:29:20] They would vary from, um, Peter and I would spend lots of time translating.

NOBLE: [01:29:24] Translating. Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:29:26] And it never got done. And the tapes got, the tapes were in the trunk that I was sending back to America from, and they never got through.

NOBLE: [01:29:35] Oh, no. Oh. What a loss.

VINCENT: [01:29:37] I wrote, I wrote, I wrote a big essay on it and for, because I got into publishing after I came back. But no, that was totally remarkable to have that experience.

NOBLE: [01:29:50] No kidding.

VINCENT: [01:29:51] It's just absolutely.

NOBLE: [01:29:53] And you spent how many weeks with Peter?

VINCENT: [01:29:56] We were probably out there 2 or 3 weeks at least.

NOBLE: [01:29:57] Yeah. Yeah. And you'd sleep, where did you stay?

VINCENT: [01:30:00] In a rest house.

NOBLE: [01:30:03] Ah, yeah.

VINCENT: [01:30:03] Not a very fancy one, but.

NOBLE: [01:30:05] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:30:05] Yeah. He stayed there and had his, you know, his father and his six wives at the compound, we'd go there and.

NOBLE: [01:30:14] Ah.

VINCENT: [01:30:14] And that was. So I got very much in touch with what it was like to be in that kind of circumstance.

NOBLE: [01:30:21] You're far from the university faculty housing.

VINCENT: [01:30:25] Oh, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:30:25] During that time.

VINCENT: [01:30:26] Oh, yeah. Or just different kinds of. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:30:30] That would have been then, I think, that a greater facility in Igbo would have been very nice.

VINCENT: [01:30:35] Well, they weren't speaking Igbo. They were speaking, um, what was the language? But there were several. But that came up, the question.

NOBLE: [01:30:42] That was not Igbo?

VINCENT: [01:30:44] No. Uh, what do they call it? Ogoja. And the language is Ogoja.

NOBLE: [01:30:52] Oh, oh.

VINCENT: [01:30:52] But there are many. But like when he sang, one of the praise singers, he sang once. We were doing things. And he would break into pidgin English and the formal English. Italian, because there had been Italian road workers. And Peter asked him, why do you like to speak in so many languages? I'll never forget this. It came back as Peter's translation. "The more languages I know, the further my story will travel."

NOBLE: [01:31:20] Oh.

VINCENT: [01:31:21] Isn't that brilliant?

NOBLE: [01:31:22] Yes.

VINCENT: [01:31:23] I mean, it was just totally. So that was his whole, uh, not his whole, but it was an interesting esthetic. And so, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:31:35] I want to talk about the tapes being lost a little bit more. Was your whole, so when you left, you had your own trunk of your own personal clothing and books and stuff.

VINCENT: [01:31:46] You know, the stuff that I was sending home, which involved the tapes, that was. I had, partly because my dad liked to work with wood, so I had a big box made out of teak.

NOBLE: [01:32:01] Oh. As a gift to your father, to bring to your father?

VINCENT: [01:32:02] Well, once he could break it down and use the teak.

NOBLE: [01:32:05] Oh, okay. Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:32:06] Yeah. But inside, you know, there are things like I bought, like masks.

NOBLE: [01:32:12] Sure.

VINCENT: [01:32:12] And what was it called? Efik, the cloth. There was a famous cloth.

NOBLE: [01:32:19] A kind of weaving, yeah.

VINCENT: [01:32:21] And it was a cloth from a village. Akwete. Akwete cloth.

NOBLE: [01:32:28] Akwete cloth.

VINCENT: [01:32:29] Which the village of Akwete could no longer, the villagers could no longer buy it. They bought the Japanese simulation because the expats, I was one of the expats.

NOBLE: [01:32:39] The price had gone up too high.

VINCENT: [01:32:40] Yeah. Yeah. So anyway, the, um. Why was I telling this story about the?

NOBLE: [01:32:46] About what happened to the tapes and so.

VINCENT: [01:32:49] Oh, the box.

NOBLE: [01:32:49] So you had this teak box full of artifacts.

VINCENT: [01:32:52] And some books that were important to me.

NOBLE: [01:32:55] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:32:56] I remember, because my memory was very good at that time, I made a whole list that I had to provide the Peace Corps to get insurance, you know, that they would compensate me for.

NOBLE: [01:33:04] Okay.

VINCENT: [01:33:05] And, um, I. But in any case, I put the. And I left it there in Nsukka, and I left thinking the Peace Corps was going to come by and pick it up and ship it out.

NOBLE: [01:33:18] Yes. The whole trunk. The whole box.

VINCENT: [01:33:20] Yeah. It never happened.

NOBLE: [01:33:21] And that didn't happen.

VINCENT: [01:33:22] Well, a week later, the campus was invaded.

NOBLE: [01:33:25] Invaded and closed, and everything came to a halt.

VINCENT: [01:33:28] Yeah. Yeah. So that was. It was, yeah, I was sad.

NOBLE: [01:33:34] Well, had you known, I suppose you could have put them in a little pack and carried it on your back.

VINCENT: [01:33:37] Well, I had other things that were that I, I don't know if you ever got that book. It's called After Language.

NOBLE: [01:33:44] Yes. Letters to, um.

VINCENT: [01:33:46] Jack Spicer.

NOBLE: [01:33:46] Spicer.

VINCENT: [01:33:47] Yeah. And that has an account of my going, my leaving.

NOBLE: [01:33:50] Well, why don't you. Can you tell that again now? I read it, but it was a year ago.

VINCENT: [01:33:55] No, I. In very privileged fashion, I was given, a university car came and picked me up at my place.

NOBLE: [01:34:03] And this was a week before.

VINCENT: [01:34:05] Yes, yes, yes. Formalities was.

NOBLE: [01:34:07] The campus was invaded.

VINCENT: [01:34:07] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:34:08] Okay. A car came.

VINCENT: [01:34:09] Yeah. See, I left, was it June 22nd? And the war broke out by July 7th or 6th.

NOBLE: [01:34:15] June 22nd of '67.

VINCENT: [01:34:17] Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:34:18] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:34:19] And so I, um, I got in, so I was taken to the, to, you know, my students came. It was a very sad parting, you know, because I knew things were not going to be good.

NOBLE: [01:34:34] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:34:35] And so then I went. It took me to Onitsha, to the place to catch the ferry. The bridge was already closed.

NOBLE: [01:34:43] So this is the bridge across the Niger River connecting the eastern region with the mid-western region?

VINCENT: [01:34:48] Yes, yes, yes. I forget, where were you in Nigeria?

NOBLE: [01:34:50] I was in the Midwest.

VINCENT: [01:34:51] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:34:52] And so you came across the river on a boat?

VINCENT: [01:34:56] A ferry. The ferry.

NOBLE: [01:34:56] A ferry.

VINCENT: [01:34:57] Yeah, but I which I barely made the one I was getting on. But I got there and I, um, was scared because I was, asked the next door neighbor. I had about 100 pounds in my sock. You weren't supposed to take any money out of the East.

NOBLE: [01:35:20] Okay. And so this was a currency that was Biafran currency?

VINCENT: [01:35:24] No, no, no, no. This was Nigerian.

NOBLE: [01:35:25] Nigerian currency. They didn't want money to leave?

VINCENT: [01:35:28] No, I mean, because they could use it.

NOBLE: [01:35:31] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:35:32] And so. And that was there. And then I'd been keeping these journals, right?

NOBLE: [01:35:39] Yeah. These very ones which we're looking at right now.

VINCENT: [01:35:42] Which, and I discussed, I discuss, I'm reflecting on the things that are happening on campus.

NOBLE: [01:35:47] Yes. Oh.

VINCENT: [01:35:48] And the war movements, you know, because the campus was close to war activity.

NOBLE: [01:35:57] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:35:58] So preparations and so forth. But I had a lot of my thoughts and, uh. But anyway, I had, we had had our Peace Corps or whatever they called that conference where you.

NOBLE: [01:36:09] Termination conference.

VINCENT: [01:36:10] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:36:11] And that had already happened?

VINCENT: [01:36:12] Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And there was this one guy, who was it? Jeffrey somebody, who had had their work confiscated by, and taken away. You know, in other words, it was dangerous.

NOBLE: [01:36:30] Yeah. His political views.

VINCENT: [01:36:33] Yeah. And I was scared shitless that I was going to lose these journals, let alone be put in jail.

NOBLE: [01:36:42] As the writer of them. Yes.

VINCENT: [01:36:43] Yeah. So that was all there. And then I had, while I was in Nigeria, I had started what we call a small press, doing poetry books with my students. And we'd done two books, one of mine and one of a fellow faculty member and poet. Oko Oneodi.

NOBLE: [01:37:04] So you're saying that you had printed a book of your own poetry?

VINCENT: [01:37:07] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:37:08] And also a book of?

VINCENT: [01:37:09] Another friend on staff, Oko Oneodi, who's a Nigerian poet.

NOBLE: [01:37:14] So you had published several copies of yours and the other guy's books.

VINCENT: [01:37:17] A few of of his, yeah, and mine. But I was taking mine. I had about 30 copies of it.

NOBLE: [01:37:21] Of your own book.

VINCENT: [01:37:22] And so, uh, that was printed and that was, I had a raffia bag that could open, like, you know, could open out.

NOBLE: [01:37:30] Yeah. What was the name of your book?

VINCENT: [01:37:32] Piece by Piece.

NOBLE: [01:37:33] Piece by Piece.

VINCENT: [01:37:34] P-I-E-C-E.

NOBLE: [01:37:35] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:37:36] And so I, um, what did I do? There was this guy who was the, checking out everybody.

NOBLE: [01:37:45] Before you get on the ferry?

VINCENT: [01:37:46] Yeah. You know, you had to go through a, what do we call it now at the airport?

NOBLE: [01:37:50] Airport security.

VINCENT: [01:37:51] Security. And, you know, a little pistol on the side of his hip. And he walked with a hobble, so that's why I figured he wasn't conscripted.

NOBLE: [01:38:01] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:38:01] Or he had been conscripted to do this instead of carrying a rifle somewhere.

NOBLE: [01:38:04] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:38:05] And so these are cherries, cherry back. Scared shitless that I wasn't going to get across that big river that was 30 yards away from me. And so he was, um, I don't even know if I opened the suitcase, but he saw my name on my book.

NOBLE: [01:38:25] And so he sees you're the author.

VINCENT: [01:38:26] He sees the author. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:38:29] And you don't have other Peace Corps volunteers with you at this?

VINCENT: [01:38:31] No, no, no.

NOBLE: [01:38:31] You're alone?

VINCENT: [01:38:33] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:38:33] Okay.

VINCENT: [01:38:34] And so he's fascinated. I said, well, I'm a poet. He said, read me one. You know. So I opened the book and it's a, um. Or maybe he looked through and he saw the title and chose it.

NOBLE: [01:38:50] He chose which one? He pointed to one?

VINCENT: [01:38:52] Yeah. And it's called On My Way to Take Out an American Negro Girl.

NOBLE: [01:38:56] Ah.

VINCENT: [01:38:56] That was back in the days when Negroes were Negroes.

NOBLE: [01:38:59] Yeah, yeah.

VINCENT: [01:39:00] Or what Black people, the terminology had not changed to Black or African American.

NOBLE: [01:39:05] That's right. It was right on the cusp of changing.

VINCENT: [01:39:08] And young women could still be called girls without. Yeah, it was totally. And, uh, so, anyway, I read it out loud to him, and at the end he.

NOBLE: [01:39:24] Do you have it handy here? Could you read it?

VINCENT: [01:39:27] Oh, yeah. Just, I could, just let me see if I can find it immediately.

NOBLE: [01:39:31] Well, I'm going to turn this turn [off].

VINCENT: [01:39:33] I need a little bit of water.

NOBLE: [01:39:35] Yeah. [tape break] Okay, we're back on. And Stephen's about to read from the book Piece by Piece.

VINCENT: [01:39:42] No, I.

NOBLE: [01:39:43] No, it's not?

VINCENT: [01:39:44] But this, I'm going to read from the poem that I, that I read.

NOBLE: [01:39:47] Okay. Same poem we're talking about. Yeah. So this is the poem that the, the guy at the ferry wanted to read. Did he, but he didn't read it himself?

VINCENT: [01:39:58] I read it. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:39:59] Okay.

VINCENT: [01:40:03] So this is, this is the. I arrive, I'm in the, uh, at the check point. And so I'm greeted by this man in this way. "Good morning. The short black man about my age said in English. He had a bad leg that made him hop on one foot and drag the other toward me. I assumed the leg kept him from being a potential fighter in the new army. Where are you going? I'm going to Benin, then Lagos, then my home in America. Can you open your bag? He smiled a little, which I took to be a good sign. I opened the suitcase. He checked the inside pockets, looked under my clothes. He found nothing."

VINCENT: [01:41:02] "The satchel was a raffia bag, was a deep. Was deep and shaped in a wide arc that spread open when the handles were separated. He held my journals and 30 copies of Piece by Piece, my brand new and only book of poems. It had been printed letterpress in a small, windowless shop with a treadless foot press on a dirt floor. The light came in from the door and cast itself across the ink cans, the type trays, and countertop. It was a beautiful staple-bound chapbook with white glossy covers, the poems printed on orange newsprint. A little amazingly, he asked." I'm improvising from the other book. But, um.

VINCENT: [01:41:56] "As I stood before the officer, I was trying to get 30 copies across the Niger. I was not worried about the poems. It was the journals. Those three big bound books with lined pages that students and used to take notes at the university. That concerned me. They had very elaborate notes. Much to my amazement, the officer did not want to look at my journals. He matched my name on the book cover to the one in my passport. Is this your book? Yes, it is. I am both a professor at the university and a poet. I do not think this description had any effect or importance. Had any effect or importance. There is a strong possibility of a war and I'm going to the other side. I'm abandoning the new state. Why should I be trusted?"

VINCENT: [01:42:58] "I watch him open up to the two page poem in the middle. The piece is called on My Way to Take Out an American Negro Girl. It was 1967, and Negro was still common usage. Not the word Black, or as now, African American. I did not know how good the officer's English might be, and I certainly not, was not at all sure he would think of this idea, or whether, more significantly, he would suddenly take exception to the thought that I'm not at all a nice seeming guy, but another white man, another neo-colonial who has, among other suspect things, been staying in Africa to exploit Black women as well as whatever I might already have done to Black women in America. On top of all that, he will seize this moment here on the edge of the Niger to incarcerate and punish me for the sins of all white men, anything and every unforgivable thing that has been done to Africa."

VINCENT: [01:44:02] "Yes, he will stop me just at the moment when I am about to go. In fact, escape to the other side of the river where I will be among and join the enemies, those who will soon begin to cross the river and kill his people. My mind is running wild, and I can see down the riverbank that the ferry is about to leave. Can you read this for me? I take a quick breath and begin to read the poem aloud and as kindly as I can. I will not repeat it here. Only just as I do, but only just to say if I can say it right, the poem explores every fear I had, which were paired with what I imagined might be the fears of the Black woman about the two of us going out together in

public in America, a very racist America, and imagining what others may or may not be thinking."

VINCENT: [01:44:56] "Let me quote you some of the lines, these lines that I am now reading out loud to him one on one, while he also reads the poem along in his copy of the open book, while the periphery of my eye occasionally drifts down to the pistol in the holder on his hip, something that I had only, that I had not already fully noticed. Here it goes. 'On my way to take out an American Negro girl, I began to think I am Black happy, afraid to be torn with the words nigger happy or gutter happy or snipe happy.' I can see the officer's eyes move slowly, slightly back and back and forth with each line and his thumb holding open the book from the spine as I continue. 'The good ones tell me to get high on the Jewish girl or the Greek girl, but not the nigger girl.'"

VINCENT: [01:45:55] "I have absolutely no idea what he is really thinking. And I'm a little terrified that the worst is about to happen. Yet at the same time, I'm getting into the rhythm, movement and sound of the poem, and that seems to take me out of my dread as to what might be his decision about my fate, whether or not I'm going to be able to catch the ferry or get turned around for more questioning or worse. I continue, 'Who they say is unhappy and stiff with the whore my father planted in her mother's veins. But I guess I am Black happy, unafraid of my father, a little wary of her brother. My brother? Yes, fair to say. Wary of her brother. This officer. Indeed, indeed, Jack.'" I'm writing this book to Jack Spicer.

NOBLE: [01:46:49] Yes.

VINCENT: [01:46:49] "I will not take you through the rest of the poem imagining her fears against my fears. But just imagine I was on top of each word instead of fear. I began to, I began to sense my voice was traveling through the air in a space much larger than both of us were. The words seemed to literally bounce up and down on the surface of the wide and slowly moving Niger. 'But if she is free, as I am free, I think it will be more like the dance of lizards. You know, when the ground is so hot. The secret way to survive is how to make your feet touch and move with an immediate art across

that terrible ground.' I looked up when I finished, not at all knowing what to expect."

VINCENT: [01:47:40] "I like it. He smiles and laughs. In a strange way, I thought he identified with something he had also experienced that was comparable. If there had been time, it was something I might have wanted to ask. Can I have a copy? Of course, I will sign my name if you want. Please. I signed the copy and gave it to him and watched as he quickly slipped it into his bag. If he were used to taking bribes, I suspect my book was a unique one. You can go. Thank you. I picked up the suitcase and raffia bag and walked as rapidly as I could down the pedestrian trail to the car ramp and up onto the ferry. In a minute, the ferry men were releasing the ropes."

NOBLE: [01:48:33] Wonderful. Thank you for reading that. And so then you did as you told the guy you were going to. You went to Benin and from there to Lagos and from there?

VINCENT: [01:48:44] Yeah. Oh, I went, I was in, oh, France and I went to. There's a funny story, I went to. Somebody, an English guy, said, well, you should go to Corsica.

NOBLE: [01:48:56] Hmm.

VINCENT: [01:48:56] And so I took this plane full of French, no, Belgian French-speaking colonials coming up from the Congo for their summer. And I went to Corsica.

NOBLE: [01:49:06] You flew?

VINCENT: [01:49:07] Yeah. Flew.

NOBLE: [01:49:08] From Lagos?

VINCENT: [01:49:09] Lagos to Corsica.

NOBLE: [01:49:10] Wow.

VINCENT: [01:49:11] And I landed in Nice. And, um, there I was surrounded by enormous number, amount of white flesh, let me tell you.

NOBLE: [01:49:22] Yes. After Nigeria.

VINCENT: [01:49:24] And the sun and they're just. And I'm staying in this Hotel Negresco, a classy place, terrycloth robes as thick as my ankles, you know? It was just amazing. In those days, if you were going somewhere and you had to stay overnight to catch the next flight, they'd put you up.

NOBLE: [01:49:43] Yes.

VINCENT: [01:49:44] And this is one of the fanciest hotels on the Mediterranean. I think Sophia Loren stayed there, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:49:50] Ah.

VINCENT: [01:49:51] Anyhow, I went to Corsica and this little town called Calvino, where I got a boarding house or bed and breakfast. And it was June. The strawberries were ripe. It was really lovely. The air was lovely. And then. And I was going to write an article, which I did. I did write an essay called Will Biafra Survive?

NOBLE: [01:50:16] Ah.

VINCENT: [01:50:16] Which was then eventually published in a magazine in East Africa called Transition.

NOBLE: [01:50:20] Uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:50:22] And which was in favor of secession, so they kind of edited it in ways that I didn't agree with.

NOBLE: [01:50:29] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:50:30] But modified it.

NOBLE: [01:50:32] Darn editors.

VINCENT: [01:50:34] And so I. But anyway, who was in Calvino along with me? It's home of the French Foreign Legion. And I was paranoid enough given, I mean, I think we all had variations on post-traumatic stress after going through this whole evolution from whatever into Biafra.

NOBLE: [01:50:53] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:50:54] It's hard.

NOBLE: [01:50:55] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:50:55] And especially where I was.

NOBLE: [01:50:57] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:50:57] I mean, I think it was hard for everybody, but Abbott, being one of the people that was really traumatized by what he went through in the Midwest. But in any case, I was there and at 5:00 in the morning, these boots would start marching.

NOBLE: [01:51:13] Oh.

VINCENT: [01:51:13] And I'd go to a bar and these guys with tattoos, they would talk about how many people they had killed and, you know, all the stuff that I did not need.

NOBLE: [01:51:23] Oy.

VINCENT: [01:51:23] And so I left. I left Corsica and went on to France and England and stayed in England.

NOBLE: [01:51:33] Did you, were you able to reconnect with people in France that you'd been with, what, ten years earlier or so?

VINCENT: [01:51:38] Yeah, yeah. So it was good. And then I made my way back to New York and then to California. And then what am I coming back into but the Haight-Ashbury, which where I'd lived before, I'd lived almost at the corner of Haight and Ashbury before I left. It was just beginning to change a little bit. There were collectives.

NOBLE: [01:52:00] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:52:00] One. And so it was, people had absolutely no interest whatsoever where I'd been or whatever. The whole psychedelic thing was intense. And also the emergence of the Black Panthers and.

NOBLE: [01:52:20] Oh, yes.

VINCENT: [01:52:20] A lot of, you know, the civil rights stuff didn't, didn't go away at all as it shouldn't have anyway, in any case. But. And that began to capture my mind. And so I, I tried to write about what I did, and not very effectively. I thought I'd write a novel, but, you know, da da da da da. The, um, so it was a. But I think it took me about 2 or 3 years before I really came out of, you know, readjusted to living in this country. It was very.

NOBLE: [01:52:54] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:52:54] You probably went through similar.

NOBLE: [01:52:56] Not having anybody have a glimmer of an understanding of what you'd experienced, not much less caring.

VINCENT: [01:53:04] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:53:06] How old were you when you got back? I'm thinking about.

VINCENT: [01:53:08] I was 26.

NOBLE: [01:53:09] So you were just barely spared.

VINCENT: [01:53:13] No longer draftable. Right. Timing was just right.

VINCENT: [01:53:16] Had a big party that night in Nigeria celebrating my liberation.

NOBLE: [01:53:19] You had your 26th birthday in Nigeria.

VINCENT: [01:53:22] I did join the Committee of Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [01:53:27] CRV [Committee of Returned Volunteers]?

VINCENT: [01:53:27] CRV.

NOBLE: [01:53:28] Yeah. Here in San Francisco?

VINCENT: [01:53:31] Yeah. So Mimi Budd, who will be with us.

NOBLE: [01:53:34] Yes, yes.

VINCENT: [01:53:35] There. And I don't know, Kathleen Whitney, I don't think so, but maybe others. And so that was good.

NOBLE: [01:53:45] Mimi was involved in, uh, getting people lined up for the Biafran Airlift.

VINCENT: [01:53:50] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:53:50] Did you ever consider?

VINCENT: [01:53:52] Well, I knew she was, you know, I was too. I was, so I had such mixed history there.

NOBLE: [01:53:58] Yeah. And the airlift, of course, was allowing the, the secession effort to continue.

VINCENT: [01:54:04] Yeah. Yeah. It wasn't like I was against it and I wasn't for starving people. It was just that I was totally, um, part of me I think was really, I don't know if it was outraged by what happened, but it just seemed. Well, I guess, I guess really became convinced while I was still

there that once the wheels of war get going, no matter what might seem the right thing to do it, the right thing never gets done. It's just these wheels keep moving, and it's just like the United States invading Iraq. I mean, they, those people got those wheels going, and there's no stopping it. You know, just let's try to, tried as hard as we did. You know, it's always this, this kind of inevitability about the demons rule.

NOBLE: [01:54:57] CRV was active in the '60s. I don't hear talk of it anymore.

VINCENT: [01:55:02] No, I don't. I'm sure it dissolved. I mean, I think it was just. I forget. I really forget.

NOBLE: [01:55:10] You're in touch with any people from your group?

VINCENT: [01:55:14] Any people from my group? Steve Wasserman. I got to reunite with Steve last year at the national conference.

NOBLE: [01:55:21] Yeah.

VINCENT: [01:55:22] And that was terrific because we were good friends. And he did not talk about how he got kicked out, but which caused, enraged us all. And I won't go into detail there. And it was Jack Elwell who was in the North. I've seen him, and I've seen, of course, I used to see Dan all the time, and there were others that I haven't seen in a long time and I haven't seen. In my group, I don't know. Kathleen Whitney, I guess I saw 3 or 4 years ago. Uh. I don't know. It just hasn't.

NOBLE: [01:55:59] And with Nigerians? You developed so many friendships with Nigerians.

VINCENT: [01:56:03] Yeah. Well, you know, it became really hard on account of the war.

NOBLE: [01:56:07] Yeah. You would have lost a lot.

VINCENT: [01:56:09] You know, it's like Ken Saro-Wiwa was dead. Obi Wali's dead. I mean, many of them are dead. And the students, we had a reunion,

actually, an unintentional reunion. There was a Christopher Okigbo conference, who was a Nigerian poet who was killed about one week into the war. He was like a really a romantic, thinking he could be a soldier and for Biafra. And it didn't work. But he has a whole legacy of his writing, which is interesting for sure. And so there was this conference at Harvard that was organized by my former student.

NOBLE: [01:56:46] Oh.

VINCENT: [01:56:47] And so I went to that, and that was great. And I got to meet Chimamanda. What's her last name?

NOBLE: [01:56:55] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

VINCENT: [01:56:58] Adichie, yeah. She was there, and a lot of interesting people were there. Well, [inaudible] was there, and I'm not sure. Um. Chevy was there.

NOBLE: [01:57:07] Oh my goodness.

VINCENT: [01:57:08] And they hadn't really talked or been together since the war. And you could cut that air with a knife because. Yeah. So that was really. And there we were in this room at Harvard with the rug up to my ankles. You realize the people who make powerful decisions in this country, they are very well. They go to school in very well appointed places, I think.

NOBLE: [01:57:36] Yes, yes.

VINCENT: [01:57:37] That's very interesting. I say that, but I had a great time. And so some of my students were there and former students. That was good. I think they're, you know, Nigerians in general I don't think live as long as we do because of the, um, whatever reason. I mean, they're often gone in their 60s. That's my experience. But anyway, that was, that was good. So, but it's influenced me.

VINCENT: [01:58:06] I just think that I came back, I was very involved with, I was head of poetry in the schools, and I think people thought I was something

of an oddball. This is like early '70s, kind of insistent that the program employ poets of different backgrounds, different, you know. And poetry is like any other establishment in this country, it has its white center, you know, and which has always been challenged by the outside. And I was willing to incorporate the outside. And a lot of people have very vested interest in maintaining what they consider themselves being at the center. So that was, thought I brought all that, I mean, Peace Corps, which is part of that experience, you know, of being open that way. But I think I was fortunate I grew up in a family that was very interested in the other.

NOBLE: [01:59:05] Yes.

VINCENT: [01:59:05] Yeah. So it was, it's all part of a thread. And, uh, and our country is still at war within itself about all these things, right?

NOBLE: [01:59:14] That's true. Yes.

VINCENT: [01:59:17] Yeah. You think it's never going to go away, but maybe that's what we're, what we're given. But I hope you're happy with it.

NOBLE: [01:59:27] Very much. And I thank you very much, Stephen Vincent.

VINCENT: [01:59:30] Okay. Thank you.

NOBLE: [01:59:31] Is there any other thing you want to say?

VINCENT: [01:59:32] Probably at 2:00 in the morning.

NOBLE: [01:59:34] It'll occur to me, I should have. Yes.

VINCENT: [01:59:36] Yeah, well, I guess it's the, uh, it's the old thing with oral histories. They can be really nice and good and so forth. And then, because I'm a writer, I always feel like a division between what I can write about something as versus what I can speak of it.

NOBLE: [01:59:51] Uh huh, uh huh.

VINCENT: [01:59:51] You know, a lot of things are lost by speaking that, just the textures of language and so forth that you get in writing.

NOBLE: [02:00:01] Yes. But there's also another level that's gained I think, in hearing, in hearing your voice.

VINCENT: [02:00:07] Well, good, good.

NOBLE: [02:00:09] Thank you, Stephen.

VINCENT: [02:00:10] That would be here, yeah. You're welcome. You know, it's funny because I don't actually.

[END OF INTERVIEW]