

2012-04-17

Gertrude Reif Hughes Oral History Interview, Apr. 17, 2012

Marie Mencher
Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/oralhistory>

Recommended Citation

Mencher, Marie, "Gertrude Reif Hughes Oral History Interview, Apr. 17, 2012" (2012). *Wesleyan University Oral History Project*. Paper 6.
<http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/oralhistory/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections & Archives at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wesleyan University Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Interview with Gertrude Hughes by Marie Mencher, at the Wasch Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, on April 17, 2012.

MARIE MENCHER: We're here on April 17th for a follow-up interview with Professor Gertrude Hughes. It's about three in the afternoon, and we're ready to get started.

Just to start off, could you please give a general chronology of when you came to Wesleyan to study, when you came here as a professor, and when you received your offer for tenure, so that we could start filling some of the gaps?

GERTRUDE HUGHES: Okay. I know you have my CV, so if I tell any of it wrong, you can check up on me.

Mencher: Yes. Absolutely.

Hughes: Going all the way back to my being a student here. I took a one-year M.A.T., Master of Arts in Teaching course, where I met many people who were going to be my colleagues much later. That was from about the summer of '63 until summer of '66. It was a one-year course, but it took me three years because I had two children that were born in 1963 and in '65. They were children number three and four of my four children.

So then you want to know whether that turned into my becoming a professor, right?

Mencher: Yes.

Hughes: Right. It did. In the fall of 1966, I was invited to teach English 101, which was going to be taught in a new way by a new professor, Richard Ohmann, who has long since become a good friend of mine. But then he was just coming to us from Harvard where he had done his Ph.D. He wanted to create a course that had to do

with what in those days was called transformational grammar, inspired by Noam Chomsky, a famous man, who is still very famous today.

I really don't remember how we did it. But one of the reasons I was brought in was that we were creating small classes, only twelve or fifteen students, and they needed at least one more person to teach. And because I had done well in the MAT program and was seen to be a grown-up, they hired me. For \$750 a year, or a semester? I cannot remember exactly, but it was a huge amount for me.

It was very good for me, because I found that I was getting to be part of the English Department. Every Monday we had English 101 meetings, with Joe Reed, Dick Ohmann, George Creeger, and some other great people—and me.

We all would sit around the table in 270 Court Street, long before Downey House became a home for the English Department. Downey House in those days had the post office in its basement, and it had a ballroom upstairs, and easily five offices. And bathrooms.

So, from 1966 until 1970, I was an adjunct teacher, which meant I was not on the tenure track.

Mencher: Right.

Hughes: Adjunct people. We didn't have very many. Though their presence has been increasing in the last ten years or so, as the whole place is sinking into insolvency, taking in too many students in order to get the money they need, and having to fake what used to be a very luxurious faculty-student ratio.

Okay, so I did that until fall '76, at which time I had also been teaching some literary classes for incoming freshman. And then, because I had been going to Yale from the time I was 35, I earned my Ph.D. I did that while I was teaching 101 classes--one per semester-- and raising those four children with my husband. It was quite a hectic time. You can imagine trying to drive to New Haven three times a week. I could never go more than three times a week—but I don't think

I'm supposed to talk about getting my Ph.D. What was your next question about this period?

Mencher: Sure, can you tell me when you got tenure?

Hughes: Oh, that's way later.

Mencher: Is it?

Hughes: You don't get tenure until after you've had a contract for seven years.

Mencher: I see.

Hughes: And then after that, if you didn't get tenure, you can continue to teach for an eighth year, but then you have to leave. I got my Ph.D. in '76, and I was hired that year. For what turned out to be a permanent position—which means I got my tenure in the '82-'83 year.

Mencher: Perhaps we can talk more about that process a little later, but I'd love to find out more about your experiences here. Especially during the time when Wesleyan was expanding the student body enormously and beginning to admit women and minorities around the same time when you were beginning to work as an adjunct professor.

Hughes: I think I was no longer adjunct then. Well, not when the women came. Let me review. Employment: '76 to '83 Assistant Professor, '82 to 1992, Associate Professor, that's after you get tenure, and then '92 to the end, 2006, Full Professor. I think it was '73 when women started coming, so I guess I was still adjunct then.

It was the earlier seventies, say '73 to '76, when all of the sudden there were people who had never been here before: Blacks, who were being looked for—recruited—by the Admission people to come to Wesleyan. It was a genuine effort, we meant it, we offered to help them. We did the best we could, but actually the University was very un-prepared.

Mencher: In what way?

Hughes: In what way? If you were a student coming here, you would get a questionnaire asking if you would like to be in a double-room, or a three-person room, or a suite, and would you be willing to share with a black student? It was all amateurish.

They were better with the women. I think I told you last time that I was on the cover of the Alumni Magazine. The editors ran an issue about feminism that featured a number of the women who were here I was head of Women's Studies at the time, and they put my picture on the cover of the magazine. It was a nice looking thing, and they asked me all the things you're asking me now, probably.

So there were two new things happening at the same time, and they both in the end had to do with what we now think of as human rights.

We were progressive, basically, as we still are. Wesleyan does that kind of lefty stuff very well. Jack Hoy was hired away from Swarthmore to come here in order to change the Admission policy, and make sure that it was good for Wesleyan. In many ways it was.

But as I said, first of all we had this idea that we could just ask people whether they were willing to sleep in the same room with these new people that were coming. Today that seems amazingly stupid—and innocent. James Baldwin says: "The innocence is the crime." He's a famous black writer of wonderful American prose. And it was the innocence that was the crime, and our innocence was quite criminal. If I had been invited—well, I was as a woman—but as a black

woman, or even as a black child from Harlem, let's say—I don't think I would have come, actually.

But anyway, they came. They had terrific scholarships. At least one of them was on parole from somewhere in the great prison world of America, which was not nearly as bad as it is now, but bad enough. It was said he couldn't come back after—I think— March break, because he was supposed to be living within five miles of the Bronx.

Mencher: Oh.

Hughes: That was an example of the kind of innocence or stupidity on our part. Not his. It was the college's thinking: "Oh, there's a really smart young man." And he was smart, but he also had serious issues, some sort of criminal record, that he had to do something about. I remember him. George Walker, I think. Maybe I shouldn't use names.

The people in my classroom were people that I, who had never been to a public school myself, were strange to me. I hadn't seen people outside or under the upper middle class, which no longer exists, but in those days it did. So I didn't really understand.

On the other hand, I had that wonderful mentor, Elizabeth Ormsby; I've already spoken to you about her. She was working as a lecturer off the tenure track, and she was extremely wise, and extremely wonderful. She had so much to teach me about the rights of these students, about the ways these students were intelligent, even though they said, "I ain't."

She was certainly as upper class as I was, but she understood individuals as people rather than as where they lived, or where they had studied. She helped me understand the rights of those children, not in a legalistic way—and they weren't children, of course, those students—but in the terms of the real predicament that our generosity had put them in.

And our generosity, or our good intentions, as so often in life, was quite bothersome for them, probably hurtful. Elizabeth Ormsby understood that, and became somebody to whom they could come after class, and say: "I just don't know. I can't spell all this stuff. I don't know what they mean, even when I write it all down."

They tended to come to me after a while, too, because Elizabeth was kind of tutoring me to tutor them. She did that as a friend. She didn't think I was dumb, or that I was unsophisticated (which I certainly was), or that I was being mean and condescending to them. But I was overwhelmed, as all of us, I think, probably were. Including the students themselves, but we were right behind them.

And eventually it did get better.

Mencher: What were the kinds of things these students come to you or her about?

Hughes: They came to us about their homework, just as they do now, in the writing workshops, which were just starting then. They would come ostensibly for homework, but also to say that they were homesick, and that they didn't like it here. Or that they loved it here, but how come people were so strange? Over and over, it was clear that they felt they had no place here. There are a lot of ways you can express that misery, there are many examples, but it's all one thing.

If it sounds as though I make it a little too dramatic, it was that dramatic. We at Wesleyan weren't innocent, but we were naive and ill-prepared. We just thought: "Oh, you are people who need us. And we are wonderful. Come join us here. We'll share."

You can't just share. You have to find out what people want, and what people are expecting from you. Well, they were expecting to be put in jail, or to be looked down on, or to be spoken to very carefully so that they could hear what we are saying. Just as I could hardly understand what a southern black twenty-year old was saying, [southern accent] "... because Ah don' know nothin' 'bout this."

[ends accent] How could we expect them to adjust to the way we speak? Not until they hear more than one person, a roomful of people, can they begin to take it in.

They felt unrecognized, and we were not able to recognize what they really needed. It had to be tackled one by one: dealing with homesickness, apprehension, a strange vocabulary. I have no idea of your background, but I imagine it isn't quite the same as some of your classmates who probably are not white, let's say, and also poor. Wesleyan has come a long way since the '70s.

But still, whoever is poor here has a hard time.

Mencher: Yeah.

Hughes: But I know feeling out of place is a horrible sensation, even if you have good friends. Because if you go visit someone's home, what do they wear? I don't wear pajamas. What do they wear at breakfast? What should I pack? What am I going to pack in? I only have a backpack, or a cheap cardboard case that my mother gave me.

At Wesleyan we were very proud because members of the English Department and the Religion Department, and actually quite a few other faculty were going on rides down south to register people to vote, or protest, or work with Martin Luther King. Some of them lost tenure because of that, probably. Not because Wesleyan was against this activism, but because they weren't here as much as they might have been, and they weren't publishing. And when you don't publish at Wesleyan, you cannot get tenure. Period. It's always been that way.

Mencher: So, to elaborate on that. Besides publishing, were there other requirements, such as personal qualities, that the University was looking for in moving professors along on the tenure track?

Hughes: I would hope so, but I don't think so. I think everyone had to wake up to a wider culture that had always existed, but to include it in what was then the middle class. And they woke up in various ways. The one I know the best is—could they wake up to women? First, there were no women students since the end of the 19th century, when a small group was admitted but only for a few years, after which they were asked to leave again. And then all of a sudden, there were women admitted for their last two years, was it? In '73 we had our first women graduates.

Mencher: Okay.

Hughes: Then they gradually added students for the lower classes.

And were there lockers for them in the gym? The answer is no. Were there coaches and sports? Yes. But where were you going to change? And where were you going to go to the bathroom there?

You'd come in to Fisk Hall, and you'd think, "Oh, gee, I have to go to the bathroom." Well, you couldn't. I think it was the same in the laboratories. I don't remember seeing a bathroom that I could go into in Fisk Hall in '75 or '76. I don't know when it stopped, but those were the sorts of things that were slow to come. We had to whine and complain quite a lot about bathrooms and locker rooms—which was part of saying, "Hey people, you're not ready."

There was laughter, giggles, about women, and there was certainly harassment for years. I don't know that it's stopped yet, because it hasn't stopped in the world—but it did get better here.

Mencher: Do you mean among students?

Hughes: I mean both. I mean that the male faculty were careful, because they weren't stupid, but they basically pushed it as far as they could. They joked about wearing

slacks, or relationships. You know, those things can be subtle, and they're not necessarily mean.

One thing I remember: I got in here before there were any women, so I was thought of as cute Mrs. Hughes. "Cute little Mrs. Hughes." And it was not meant to be a compliment, but it certainly wasn't meant to be degrading. And yet, when push comes to shove, if you have a Ph.D. from Yale University, you probably don't want to be known as cute little Mrs. Anything. But that was what they allowed themselves to call me. To my face they just called me Gertrude.

It felt awkward if two women came into a group of men, around the table that was going to be the English Department's weekly meeting, let's say. If you were the first two women, there would be just a little rustle. And if you wore perfume, which most of us did, someone would go, "Mm, how delicious!" And that would be because— "Oh my God, they're women. They smell like lily of the valley, how exciting!" It's weird isn't it?

Mencher: Yeah.

Hughes: It felt that way to us. It didn't take long to settle down, though the harassment of course is still going on among students, of students, by male and for all I know female—in fact, I do know, female faculty.

The whole sexuality thing is getting very strange in our country anyway. It's gotten very bestial, says I. Maybe it's just an old woman talking, but I have seen students dress provocatively, seen them in clothes that nobody would have considered wearing even five years ago. It's not a come on, as far as I know. You're not hoping that your math professor will seize you, throw you onto his bed. And yet, that's what was felt about clothing then.

It was an interesting time: widening the scope of who comes here, making it a right to be here, and at the same time finding out that these advances in culture

don't just happen overnight. They have to grow like a plant. Or for that matter, like a culture.

Mencher: Did male students treat you differently as a professor? Or other professors that you know of?

Hughes: Absolutely. We were much more relaxed with each other—up to this day, I think—the females were. And there were some who didn't want to be feminist, although most of us were very much interested in feminism. We realized that we weren't seen as human beings; we were seen as women. Women weren't human beings, just like black people weren't human beings either, and some Asian people weren't human beings.

So yes, most feminists were very familiar with being the second sex. Simone de Beauvoir coined that phrase. She was a huge influence from France from 1957 on.

Her writings were translated into English in '57. I read her first in '58 when I graduated from college, and I thought, "Wow, that's right! Oh, yeah. It is a second sex."

The things that were published between 1958, which is fairly early, and 1975, are still read, because there was a very sharp understanding among scholars of how pertinent it all was. It was true at Wesleyan. Not everywhere, but in general, a woman makes less money per year, before and after tenure, than the men. And a few of us couldn't get tenure. I think you asked me about Joan Hedrick, didn't you?

Mencher: I did. I remember it coming up in the English annual reports, and it seemed like there was a lot of tension between—

Hughes: Tremendous tension, yeah. It was so unfair. You wouldn't believe it.

Mencher: Would you mind elaborating?

Hughes: She was one of my very good friends, and has remained so, which is very kind of her. She won a Pulitzer Prize for her biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe, a wonderful book. Before that, when she was still here, she had finished a well-written biography of Jack London, and it was very well received. She taught here in a very progressive way—very left compared to right—and she worked hard. She was about to come up for tenure.

She probably marched in things that I probably didn't, because I had so many time-consuming responsibilities home. I did march on behalf of one of our secretaries. I can't quite remember what it was we were protesting or demanding, but I took part.

But back to Joan Hedrick. She's a little younger than I am, and she had two children who were much younger than mine, and had her PhD long since. She didn't do what I did first have children, and then go to work. I remember she often had a cold, often looked a little droopy. She often probably had allergies—and often looked as though she were crying. It just wasn't easy for anybody to be out earning money to have a relaxed home life. Perhaps both parents are working--and who does the marketing? Who does the cooking?

The only one I know of is one of my children, who does all the cooking and all the marketing. Otherwise, nobody eats, because his wife is a very important person in a laboratory: she has to be there. He's not unimportant, certainly, but he has greater freedom, as it happens. But my kids, now in their fifties, live in a time when that is more normal. As for Joan Hedrick? She was thirty-five-ish in an anti-feminist era. When she stood for tenure, she didn't get it. She was hired one more time in her eighth year (because as I told you, our contracts are for seven years, plus eight if we have to leave) and she may have gotten some sort of something in the ninth year, too, which was no longer part of a contract.

And then she might have taken a year off, because her husband is also a professor, but somewhere else. After that she started working at Trinity. I think she was hired immediately with tenure, but I could be wrong. She was hired to create—or re-create—their Women's Studies program, since they were behind us by a little. And she had terrific teaching evaluations. Incidentally, she also is very young looking; even to this day, you think you're with a fifty-five year old woman, when you're really with a seventy-two year old woman.

She was an Americanist, and the man who was the most important professor on the Americanist side of the English Department was asked to please be her mentor. I've lost his name, but that full professor did not take care of her well. He's still here, but he's now retired. And he only cares about his own work, which is very, very good, and very interesting. He teaches wonderfully. He takes big, big classes. But he doesn't give a flying F about anything to do with anyone else, and that is not fair.

When you're a full professor, part of your job description is to help hire incoming faculty, and work on departmental organization. So when I was up for tenure, I knew what I had to do, which was baby this guy—who adored me, and I adored him—but he didn't know how to help. They don't care—they just don't, not the way women do. Women understand the problem, so after a while, we all got helping each other, but that was not yet true in those first years, when Joan and I were working here. It was the last year when you didn't have to do the national search, so they didn't. I'm sure I was just lucky, and would probably never have been hired if they had.

Joan was an early female teacher here who was lost to the University because her mentor wasn't good at helping the next teachers advance in the profession. My own mentor, George Creeger, was able to do that. However, he also was very much interested in opera, and in studying and restoring antique buildings—so there wasn't much room for Gertrude Hughes. I just followed him all the time, and I told him exactly what I didn't want. In the English Department,

those of us standing for tenure had to name three people to write letters on their behalf.

One was Harold Bloom, my dissertation director, a very, very famous professor of English at Yale. He's only six years older than I am and he was a genius—he was probably twenty-two when he got tenure at Yale. Just an incredible guy; still is.

Anyway, the department decided who they wanted to have write letters for me. George Creeger, who was my mentor, had a lot of varied interests, as I said, but I wasn't one of them—even though he was the one who had urged me, when I was an MAT student, to go on for a PhD. So although he absolutely liked me, and had never given me as a student anything but an A or maybe an A-plus, he couldn't be bothered to put together a group of people to write for me.

I had to remind him frequently that the three people I wanted were So-and-so, So-and-so, and So-and-so—no, not that guy. And these two were my “against” people—I did not want them to write letters for me.

The department members get together, as I've done for years, after I got tenure. You get together and say: “I think for Gertrude we should have an Emerson scholar.” I wrote my book on Ralph Waldo Emerson, so they would logically ask scholars in the 19th century to interview me, which they did. And they all voted for me unanimously.

Still, in the beginning, I think perhaps I had a little bit of a chip on my shoulder. I'm not sure. When you are the second sex, you don't know whether you're crazy or they are. I know that we have more women than men who don't get tenure. Absolutely sure. We have only one woman and only one man who never made full professor even after they got tenure. We now have two Associate Professors, now as I speak, in the English Department, who have tenure but will not get to Full Professor. It's just not heard of, that you are still not a Full Professor when you are sixty.

Mencher: Right. Do you want to discuss Wesleyan in general? Such as the nature of the student body, the culture of campus life as you saw it change in the eighties and nineties?

Hughes: Wesleyan in the world, Wesleyan in general, contemporary backdrop—those are all considered together, I think. Department politics, we'll not go there again. Well one of the defining periods was the Vietnam War—as it was for every college in America. Because rich people didn't have to go, and students didn't have to go. So lots of people suddenly felt a deep need to go to graduate school, and they had to get in right away because they needed to get a Ph.D. so that they would never be killed. And that is exactly what happened.

Some people didn't go to Vietnam because other people went for them, as in the Civil War, when you could pay another man to go in your place. Vietnam was a tremendous, endless topic of discussion. First of all, they didn't want the war itself, and they sure as hell didn't want to go to it. It was really two separate things. We still had the draft from the Second World War, and there was conservative political pressure being put on the universities.

Mencher: Okay. How would you describe the culture of protest against the Vietnam War?

Hughes: It wasn't only because people didn't want to go, but because it was an unfair war; it could never be won, and it was all about shooting people who were some other color from oneself.

And the attitude toward the war on campus was that military service was not an option for most students. Or they thought so. Very, very few Ivy League—I hate that category, but what are you going to do?—very few Ivy League people went. They didn't have to, which I've already explained.

I was aware of political pressure from without as well. And later, how did Wesleyan deal with the issue of divestment in South Africa? I think the students did what they're still doing. They took their issues to the Administration and the Board. They worked really hard, and I think they got more divestment than the Trustees would have wanted.

We are the poorest of the Little Three. Way the poorest. Williams is the richest. Amherst is close, and we are in a different category maybe. Which is what makes us not so high in—what's that newspaper that makes us fourteenth one year, then tenth the other year, but not much higher than that?

Anyway, those guys care how much money is spent on the faculty, and much less money is spent on the faculty of our college than at Williams or Amherst, and probably Swarthmore, too. They have more money, and they spend that overage on salary. I never thought I would have a job like this anyway, so to me the whole thing is fine, but I know that I earned much less than most of my friends in other schools, and far less than men in other schools. Absolutely sure.

So how did Wesleyan deal with the issue with divestment in South Africa? Very strongly from the students. It was the students, not the Wesleyan Board, who wanted to divest. Those in charge of our finances didn't want to divest from things that were making them money, stocks in South Africa. It was probably the mining, diamonds; I really don't know. It wasn't oil, as far as I know.

The students made a kind of a tent, a lean-to, actually, a very poor lean-to, that bore a sign reading something like: "Don't do this to us." I'm sure there are pictures of it from those years, if you wanted to see one.

But you know, for me, firstly, I think in longer stretches of time. I'm not that interested in the *New York Times*. I'm interested in long, long cultural matters, like: Is there a real spirituality, or does that have to be only decoration on the reality of material? I'm not a materialist, so I know that matter is not the most real thing in the world at all. It is simply what spirit becomes when it damn well wants to. But there is a very minor group of people in the world, sadly, who feel what I

feel. And my whole life is like that, so when you ask me about specific trends or events or movements, my mind prefers to answer in terms of wider concepts.

The gay rights movement, because it had to do with women, was closer to the books I was reading, to what my classes were about. We had plenty of gay people at Wesleyan, though I don't know how it was manifest on campus before I came. I believe women were more open, and not worried, over being lesbian than the men were over being gay.

So if you were not heterosexual, you were gay. But soon, the pink marches in New York, in Manhattan, were for gays, and it meant men. The lesbians lost the gay word. And although women can be called gay, it's very rare.

Something that is very wonderful to me as a feminist here at Wesleyan is how quickly we were able to acquire brilliant students. The ones I knew best were women, but this included men.

Mencher: Um-hmm.

Hughes: There was a lot of that in discussion here. And there was certainly transvestite clothing. I can remember a very cool guy called David something who was in a couple of my poetry courses. He used to come in skating, wearing a pink see-through, gauzy skirt and flowery top. Perfectly fine.

After Reagan came into power—was that '78, or when?—the lefty Wesleyan population became more formal in those late seventies than it had been in the early seventies.

The eighties were different anyway, because everybody was rich, suddenly. Except Wesleyan, and even we were relatively rich. In the eighties, when we should have been making money, we actually lost it in some ways that other people could tell you about quite well. So, we were kind of slipping without knowing it.

Mencher: I understand. What was your experience of obtaining grants?

Hughes: Lousy. I never asked for any except for local ones, within the campus. I got one very early, before I had tenure, when I was still an Assistant Professor. I did work on Emily Dickinson, but when I tried again to get a grant to work on anthroposophy and Rudolph Steiner, they gave the money to Sean McCann instead.

Mencher: Tough.

Hughes: Well, I was really sad, because I wrote what I thought was a good paragraph about spirituality. It didn't, you know, make me sound like a witch, or like a new age weirdo, but like a real academic person who can think. And the thing about anthroposophy, especially my kind, is that thinking is a spiritual fact, before it has anything to do with brains. Your brain is simply a materialization of what the thought activity is in a human being's soul. That was toward the end of my career, I believe—

Mencher: It looked like 1996-7.

Hughes: You're right. 2006 was my last year here. I was just bringing that up because of grants. No, I never got any, because I didn't try for them, because I didn't publish enough. I published only just what I barely had to not to be spit on.

Mencher: Can you say more about your views on spirituality? I gather you were one of very few here who thought like that. How were those interests looked on by academia?

Hughes: They were hardly noticed. But, on the whole, I've kept the academic and Steiner sides of my life quite separate. Every summer, I was president of, or a teacher in, or both, at a three-week summer institution, called the Rudolph Steiner Institute. We hired a campus in Maine for seventeen years, and after that at other campuses. This campus was called Thomas—not saint anybody, just Thomas College. It was a business college for very, very uninteresting people, with all due respect, and we just took the campus over. We had our own kitchen. We had everything the way we wanted it: really good vegetarian food--organic long before everybody else did. Wonderful, wonderful stuff.

I taught meditation there, and learned it by teaching it. I had been meditating since I was twenty-six anyway, because my mother and father had been anthroposophists, and my mother had been interested in meditation. Fifty-two years or something, that I've done it.

It wasn't until I was a full Professor that I published anything that was clearly all about Rudolph Steiner. Actually, it's coming out again in a book in the fall. It's about Rudolph Steiner an activist, and I compare him to feminist philosophers, about whom I had read quite a lot. I don't remember what it was called, but it has Rudolph Steiner and feminism in the title.

Mencher: Very good.

Hughes: I demonstrated the way Steiner speaks about thinking as a spiritual activity.

Spiritual doesn't mean good, and it doesn't mean religious, it simply means non-material, right?

Of course, it's more than non-matter, and so on. I did it because I had been given a grant. I was invited to be in a seminar by a bunch of anthroposophists whom I liked, and we had money from one of the Rockefellers. Robert McDermott—who is now at CIS California, Institute of Integral Studies, which includes anthroposophy now—he got us a week at this college. Another colleague

is Arthur Zajonc, a physicist at Amherst, also an anthroposophist, also a Buddhist, and now, the head of the Dalai Lama's life and mind thing. The absolute president of it, in Amherst College.

I wrote that essay there, and referenced it as one of my published articles for the full professorship, which I was a little late getting. Well, I had to take time because of the family, and that meant that I didn't have a good publishing record. But my department has always been so wonderful to me. And I'm very grateful for that.

That is how I have gotten through things. I've been into anthroposophy deeply, but don't talk much about anthroposophy, because it embarrasses some people. It's like being gay, actually, but I'm not closeted about being an anthroposophist. Well, in a way I was closeted about it, really. And then finally, in the last five or six years, I thought, what the fuck, I don't care anymore. I love it, and I'm good at it, and I realize that I have quite a following, actually, in anthroposophy. Quite a few people know about me, whom I don't know. But they know me, and they'd say, "Oh, was that your talk?" and "Oh, I loved it." It's very nice to hear.

So I just kind of grew into it. And I've had some luck with publishing actually. I wrote an introduction to something in 1995, and I'm still getting—no money, of course—but still getting compliments about how clear that introduction is, and readers tell me they really finally understood the field because of that.

Mencher: That's wonderful.

Hughes: That has had a certain strength in my CV. We get money, even in retirement—it's called GISOS—gee-sos, we all say, but I don't know: "Grants in something Scholarship," it stands for. And we get \$200 anyway, which is absolutely nothing now, but it used to be little bit.

I'm bringing this up because we always need money if we are invited away to give a talk, but no stipend is offered. And these anthroposophists don't have any money.

MM: This is back-tracking a little bit, but would you talk a bit about what it meant to be a feminist in the seventies, say, versus the way people think of feminism now?

Hughes: Well, it's almost back again now, I think, because it isn't considered interesting anymore. It's not considered necessary anymore. So we're almost back to reminding everybody that, hello! We're not making any money. Hello! Everyone's getting raped. It's not really clear in most marriages that are heterosexual that the woman is working more hours per day between child rearing, care-taking of the home, and a job. Many of us have paid work that is as good, say, as our husband's, or better. We are lawyers, we are laboratory scientists, we are professors, we are police. We are everything now. We don't have trouble getting jobs, except there is a glass ceiling still. But the money isn't too bad, as far as I know.

However, I think the idea that the man can put up his feet and pull out the newspaper, or whatever, or watch TV after dinner, while there are people in the family who need help with their homework, and the dishes still aren't washed—this has passed. I have four households that I can look into, because my four children all have households. I'm not overwhelmed, except for one who's a builder in San Francisco; he's working much more than the other husbands.

I have only one daughter, and her husband is wonderful. He really is a good provider, but I don't think he washes a dish. He makes bacon on Sunday morning, but he doesn't even wash that bacon thing, and that's a big job. It's heavy, and you have to pour the fat into something, and then you have to clean it. So I guess Lucy must do it. When I'm there, I do it. He didn't do that much with diapers either. I think they are still sort of fifties-ish.

Paul, another child, is a very wealthy lawyer, very beloved, and works very hard. Managing partner, I think, even though he isn't fifty yet. So he's pretty young, and extremely well known. And he happened to marry a woman who has her own money, so they really don't have any worries—I mean, they have plenty of troubles; everyone does, but not about money. My daughter-in-law—she's also a lawyer but she doesn't practice; she makes jewelry. She's not stuck with the domestic world. Have I lost track here?

Mencher: We were talking about feminism.

Hughes: Feminism, ah yes. Well, I think in the seventies and eighties, we did incredibly good writing. Writing is what I know about, you know. Just such good argumentation! I think the writing was incredibly good. I wish I could tell you all the famous, famous periodicals that showed up in the early and mid-seventies—and are still being published now, I hope, but certainly were in '06. They're just major, major titles.

Mencher: Who's doing women's studies, now?

Hughes: Christina Crosby.

Call her up, or go to her office, and ask her what the major periodicals were in the eighties and nineties, and are they still going? And she'll tell you. Christina would be a perfect person to ask. She's much younger than I am, but she certainly was here when the first big wave of really good feminists hit. I don't think she has written very much lately because she's had this paralysis for six or seven years, but she's fabulous.

And she could tell you about those three magazines which had wonderful, wonderful argumentation, really not bitchy at all: just absolutely excellent proof, in a way, of the second sex. And I'm still old fashioned enough to call it the

problem of the second sex. But they, of course, have other ways to put it. That has changed; I think feminism is not as interesting to many of the PhDs as it suddenly once was; to people in biology, people in mathematics, people in history, of course, and people in languages. But now, it's as though it's obvious. And I think that's too bad, because it isn't. There are still issues.

Mencher: Sure.

Hughes: I think women have benefitted a great deal from feminism. They get much better jobs, with or without ceiling problems. When you think how many women since I retired—in the last, say, seven years—Well, consider women presidents of colleges, it is amazing! Brown, Harvard, not Yale yet, University of Chicago, Bryn Mawr, of course. Trinity does. Does Amherst College have a woman president?

Mencher: I'm not sure.

Hughes: We haven't had one. Shame—considering how progressive we are.

Mencher: Right.

Well, maybe you wouldn't mind talking briefly about what you're working on now?

Hughes: Yes, it's anthroposophy, of course. I'm writing an introduction to a book I have collected, a little hand book, it's called "Handbook of Verses and Meditations by Rudolph Steiner," compiled and commented by Gertrude Reif Hughes. And it's going to be published by Steiner books. [Laughs] I just can't do better than that at the moment. I'd love to get something by Beacon. I'm thinking maybe my next project after this, which is really going to be finished, I hope, in June. I have an

editor to whom I'm sending it in June to read. He'll tell me, "This makes no sense," or, "this is gorgeous." I hope he tells me that, and some of the things in between.

Then I'm going to teach here for the GLS—Graduate Liberal Studies. I want to do it because I want to teach a course called Poetry and Insight, which I have taught in the English Department here, and once before for the GLS people. That is next fall, Wednesday or Thursday night, thirteen weeks. I plan to do it with some meditation in it, and some of the exercises by Rudolph Steiner that are going to be in that book. I expect to make them buy that book if it is published in time.

That is the next project, because I have a sense that poetry is a portal to spirituality. It's a way of utilizing language that turns it into a portal to spirituality. I'm not talking about writing poetry, I mean reading poetry. How can I talk about some of the things I will do in this course? Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson and some other 20th century American poets, giants of American letters. I know how to talk about them as though they are meditating when they think. So that you as a reader can hear their thinking in those poems. You don't approve or disapprove, you simply follow as a thought. I'm trying to show that when you're doing that, you're actually meditating.

It's a little circular. If, however, I can finish the writing project in June, I can give myself a nice easy fall just teaching.

And there are other people than Rudolph Steiner. There's Jean Gebser—or it might be Gesber. I know he's a male, Jean, and he's German, I think, or he might be Swiss. He's a horrible writer, in my opinion, but he's saying the same things that Steiner says. He understands that when we die, we're not gone. He understands that when we are born, we've already been here before, that we're not just evolving as turtles when we used to be dogs or something. There really is a human destiny, that humans are aware of more and more, since the 1400s. That's how long it's been. In something like 1413, Joan of Arc heard her angel. That was the last time somebody could hear an angel talk.

And ever since then, we've had to figure it out through meditation—our own thinking on a higher level. And that is now being written about. If I can do it, I'll try to get somebody to introduce me to somebody to see if we can't have one course that's about Steiner, by somebody who's an academic, who writes well and who can be understood. Maybe, maybe, it might be me, because I'm fairly promising in that regard, thank God, and my stuff is not hard to understand.

That's a lot of material to digest, but that is how I feel about anthroposophy in my projects. I'm not going to have non-anthroposophical projects; I haven't had for quite a while.

Mencher: I understand.

Hughes: And I do give quite a lot of talks, and those talks can turn into chapters if needed. That's the deal.

Mencher: Let me just finish by asking if there's anything that you wish we had talked about, or that you would have liked to touch on, that we didn't get a chance to discuss?

Hughes: What are your current projects? Where do you live now? Right here. What's changed within community that didn't meet your expectations? How do you feel about Wes's lack of core requirements?

What are the most significant campus events that you were involved in? What are your impressions of President Campbell? He was a good guy. He was here when I got tenure, so I have very good impressions of him. [Laughs] In the end, that's who has the last word, but he can be overruled by the trustees. They can say, "Sorry, President Campbell, sorry Michael Roth."

I do think Wesleyan is a progressive institution, and what makes it so is its enormous interest in rights, in human rights—just enormous. How would you

describe feminist culture at Wesleyan in 1970s? I wrote here: important, vital, high-level. And I hope I said that as well.

Mencher: You've said there was a strong community of women at Wesleyan. Who in particular comes to mind when you think about that?

Hughes: Carol Ohmann, That's Dick's wife. She died, sadly. Ann-Lou Shapiro, I mentioned her to you, she's now at the New School. And Dick Ohmann, and Dick Vann, in the History Department and the College of Letters or the CSS. I can't tell with Dick Vann—he's everywhere. Academic topics of study, department politics. He was concerned that the students were under-committed to serious study. I know that the past seven years has made the major more rigorous.

Mencher: Okay.

Hughes: And so, no, you can't get away with anything with Stephanie Weiner?

Mencher: I'm her intern, though.

Hughes: Oh, that's just fabulous. I see in these notes: "What was your role in shaping the identity of the English Department?" Zero. "What do we mean when I say I teach literature?" Who made that question up?

Mencher: I don't know who made it up, but it was in the annual reports. Whoever was writing these notes was bringing up some major questions that the faculty have been discussing.

Hughes: I see—what we mean when I say I teach literature. Of course, it's after my time.

I made poetry a regular part of the curriculum, though I couldn't believe that we could have an English Department with no poetry! That is something that I did, before we ever had Stephanie Weiner. And before we had Elizabeth Willis, who I helped to be hired here, because she's wonderful. And I was really her best reader, I would say, on our committee.

But believe me, things were going downhill, when I suddenly realized, holy shit, George Creeger doesn't do it anymore. This is my chance! I will stop teaching novels by Joseph Conrad, for God's sake, and start teaching poetry. And then of course, there were all the women poets—many of whom I knew well, and some of whom I learned to know. There's a photograph of me with Bill Chase on the day that Gwendolyn Brooks—who has since died, but only very recently—was here to receive an honorary degree.

They always take a picture of the person who's introducing the honoree, which was me in that case, because I had just published an article about her. It was about Gwendolyn Brooks and H.D. That's Hilda Doolittle. The piece was in a very good and expensive periodical that nobody could look down on. I didn't publish much, but my output was worthwhile.

I wrote a paper called "How Poems Teach Us to Think." I believe that one of the core purposes of literature is to make us think.

Mencher: That's fantastic.

Hughes: Can you hear everything I say into that [recording machine]?

Mencher: It's quiet in here, but in any case I uploaded it up onto my computer, and I could hear it fairly well.

Hughes: It's going to be quite a thing. There are so much words. Do I get to keep this or do you ?

Mencher: Do you want a copy of this?

Hughes: Yes.

Mencher: Okay, then maybe I can make a copy of it. I'll take it now, I'll make a copy of it, and then I can drop it by the Wasch Center.

Hughes: Thank you.

Mencher: Okay. Absolutely.

Do you feel satisfied that we've come to the end of this interview?

Hughes: Yes, and thank you very much.

Mencher: That's fine. I'm just going to say the closing words, and then I'll stop the recording. This has been an interview with Professor Hughes on April 17th. We're just finishing up in the Wasch Center for Retired Faculty at about 5:00 in the afternoon.

[End of Interview]