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NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA REYNOLDS

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Rebecca Reynolds, on July 26, 2019, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The interviewer is Kate Rizzi, and this is our second interview session. Thank you so much for doing this.

Rebecca Reynolds: Sure, you're welcome.

KR: At the end of our first session, we left off talking about your time at graduate school in New Brunswick, when you were studying English, and you started working for the IRW, the Institute for Research on Women. I would like to talk about that, to start off today's interview. How did the opportunity come about to work at the IRW?

RR: I can't remember who told me about the position first, but Carol Smith was the director at the time. I had had a course with her. Then, I went into meet with her and with Ferris Olin to take over Arlene [Nora]'s summer position, because she was a ten-month employee. So, we would overlap for a while, and I would get all the information I needed from her and then take over for the summer. I'd had a lot of secretarial work and administrative work in between school. I supported myself during the summers usually doing secretarial temp work. I worked for a year as an administrative assistant--it was a horrible job, actually--in Brooklyn at the Polytechnic Institute of New York, which is now the Polytechnic University of New York. They've got a huge complex now in Brooklyn. At the time, I worked in the provost's office, so I learned a lot about--at that university--functions. It was within walking distance of my apartment, which was convenient, but it wasn't exactly a dream job. [laughter] It was definitely just to support myself while I was in New York and trying to just stay with my friends from Vassar. [Editor's Note: Carol H. Smith is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers. Her career at Rutgers spanned 1959 to 2007. Smith directed the Institute for Research on Women from 1986 to 1992. Ferris Olin is a Distinguished Professor Emerita at Rutgers University. Olin earned her undergraduate degree at Douglass College and graduate degrees at Rutgers. She held the position of Executive Officer of both the Institute for Research on Women and the Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies from 1985 to 1994 and went on to cofound what is now called the Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities in the Institute for Women's Leadership. Arlene Nora worked as an administrative assistant at the IRW.]

Then, I moved back to Washington, and I worked at the World Bank. I was a floating secretary and editor. I did a lot of editing for the foreign language professionals at the World Bank, in the--believe it or not--in the Division of Transportation primarily focused on Sub-Saharan Africa. [laughter] So, that was an interesting position, and then I went to graduate school. So, I had a lot of administrative positions and I had done administrative work at a university, so I think that's why they gave me the position. It was fairly easy to catch on to the everyday office needs there. During the summer, they geared up for--I can't remember the name of the program now, because it was so many years ago. It was a program on teaching women's and gender studies [and] getting it into the curriculum, I think, at a number of colleges and schools in the area. So, they had that work in the summer. [Editor's Note: This IRW program was called the New Jersey Project: Integrating the Scholarship on Gender.]

They also were trying to put together a mailing list, and that, believe it or not, was a big project, because everything went out by mail then. So, they were just trying to get everybody's addresses

in a database that would generate labels. It was tedious work, but I had a work-study student or rather an intern, a college student, working with me. I was there for three summers. At least the first two summers, I had a college student intern who was doing a lot of that kind of grunt work of entering things in the database. A lot of what I did was purchase orders. I did some work with printing up their poster for the IRW lecture series that they still have every year. There was often somebody who was heading up that lecture series. The third year, it was a woman named Guida West, who is a sociologist. Now, I think she had been working at Rutgers but hadn't gotten tenure. She was a little bit older. I don't know when she started working at Rutgers, but she had published an influential book with somebody on poverty in America. So, the IRW wanted to hire her for the lecture series, to put together this lecture series. So, I worked with her on getting the flyer printed and putting that together. It wasn't very glamorous. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Guida West, a sociologist and author of *National Welfare Rights Movement: Social Protest of Poor Women*, began working at Rutgers in 1974 as a faculty member in Women's Studies in the Extension Division. In 1987, West became a special projects administrator at the IRW.]

I got to know Ferris Olin pretty well and Carol Smith. Ferris was there every day. Carol was often in and out; she wasn't always there every day. Nothing was e-mail then, so it was all typing letters and doing mailings and things like that, again, not glamorous, a lot of clerical work, a lot of purchase orders. The Institute for Research on Women always knew how to work within and get around University regulations. They were very savvy about that. It was interesting, because when I first started working at Rutgers in the Honors Program--after I had come back from Michigan--I was surprised, because Douglass never used those kinds of strategies to get around the regulations. It was interesting how the IRW was good at getting around certain university policies. So, I guess I don't have too much to add. I used to spend a lot of time working with the interns, who I always enjoyed. One of them was--I think her name was Athena, something like that. She's Isabel Nazario's daughter. Isabel had started out at the Center for Latino Arts and Culture, and now she's a vice chancellor? [Editor's Note: Isabel Nazario is currently the Associate Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at Rutgers. She has worked at Rutgers since 1992, and during her first year, she served as the founding director of the Center for Latino Arts and Culture.]

KR: I think so.

RR: I think a vice chancellor. So, her daughter was there one year, and one year there was a student who was not a Rutgers student. I don't remember where she was from, but she lived in Highland Park and so we often kind of walked in together. So, that was kind of interesting. One year there was a Mason Gross student. There were different people in and out, and the summers were--it was kind of a busy time. They had a lot of administrative work that they had to do in the summers.

The thing that stands out to me the most is a funny memory of Ferris buying a birthday cake. Either it was Carol Smith's birthday or another woman who worked in the office. Ferris bought a birthday cake that had gold leaf icing. So, it had icing that had actual gold flecks in it [laughter], and that was like a typical Ferris kind of extravaganza thing to do. She loved things like that. That kind of summed up Ferris at the IRW. [laughter] I remember that, but a lot of the work was

just administrative and clerical. What I learned about IRW was mostly through when I had to look back through documents in order to find something or clarify something.

I think they had been involved in the first women's Beijing--I forget what you call the Beijing Conference. They just called it the Beijing Conference, but it was a women's summit. It was a big deal, and I think it takes place every four years now. Then, I was interested to learn about their scholars in residence. So, they had had Carol Gilligan one year, and I was kind of interested in her, just because I had read her. I read correspondence around her and her stay. That was the Laurie Chair that was shared by Douglass and the IRW, I think. [Editor's Note: Sponsored by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995. In 1984, the Blanche, Edith and Irving Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies was established at Douglass College to bring outstanding scholars of women's studies to campus to conduct their research and engage in teaching. Carol Gilligan is a renowned feminist, ethicist and psychologist who held the Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies in 1986-1987.]

At that time, I really didn't know anything about Douglass and the IRW, as one of the institutes on women, at the time I don't know that they considered it a consortium at that time, but now it's a consortium of women's institutes, including Douglass. So, I was pretty oblivious to Douglass College, when I was there, because it just didn't enter into a lot of what we were doing or what IRW was doing. I was primarily aware of the landscape. [Editor's Note: Founded in 1991, the Institute for Women's Leadership Consortium (IWL) is a consortium of nine units at Rutgers-New Brunswick dedicated to the study of women and gender, to advocacy on behalf of gender equity, and to the promotion of women's leadership.]

Then, during the year, I had taught "Composition" on Douglass or "Expository Writing" on the Douglass Campus, but as far as the college was concerned, I really didn't have much information about it. So, I mean, it's kind of funny that I ended up working there in the same office complex, in the same offices even, I sat at the same desks and in a totally different capacity, with a completely different awareness of what was happening around me. That was kind of a revelation [laughter], although, when I was at IRW, the other office down in the basement of Voorhees Chapel was the Douglass Project for Rutgers Women in Math, Science, and Engineering; I think that's what they called it at the time. I met Ellen Mappen, who had founded the Douglass Project, which has become a real institution at Douglass, and about fifty percent of our students are in STEM fields. The Douglass Project is in this building [Carpender Hall], and I work with the people here. I see Ellen Mappen periodically at events, and we always say we're going to have lunch together and then I forget to call her. [laughter] So, I met her through that, and then I worked with her--just kind of coordinated on some projects--when I was at the Douglass Scholars Program a few years later. So, that was really my experience at the IRW. I was mostly aware of the kinds of things that they were gearing up for during the summers. So, with the Institute--I wish I could remember what it was called, but it was really about getting women's studies into the curriculum. [Editor's Note: Ellen Mappen served as the founding director of the Douglass Project for Rutgers Women in Math, Science, and Engineering, which began in 1986. The Douglass Scholars Program is a four-year academic program that is designed to provide academic enrichment and cultural opportunity for Douglass students.]

KR: Yes, it was The New Jersey Project: Integrating the Scholarship on Gender.

RR: Thank you. [laughter] They had some separate people that were working just on that project that were also in the office. A lot of those people were ten-month employees, so I'd kind of work with them the first month and then they'd disappear. There was one woman that stayed throughout the summer. I don't remember her name. She died from cancer later, which she was struggling with at the time. Her first name was Gail, and I don't remember her last name. So, [it was] that and then the lecture series that they put together for the fall and spring and just correspondence, a lot of correspondence that needed typing and mailing, because nothing was e-mail then. They needed clerical work, because they needed people to type and mail and do things like that.

KR: What years were those?

RR: So, that would've been '87, '88 and '89, yes. Then, in '89, that was just after my last year at Rutgers in the English Department. So, I left for Michigan in the fall after that summer. That was the last time I supported myself doing clerical work. [laughter] At the time, my downfall was that I was a really fast typist. [laughter] So, I kept getting these jobs. No, actually, I did temp work when I came back from Michigan. In the summer, I worked at Johnson & Johnson as a temp sec, which was horrible. I mean, Johnson & Johnson is a good place to work but not as a temporary secretary. So, I did these kinds of menial jobs in the summer to support myself.

KR: I will tell you a story off the record later about typing.

RR: Okay.

KR: I would like to ask a few follow up questions about the IRW.

RR: Yes, sure.

KR: You mentioned having Carol Smith as a professor. What did you know about the history of the IRW going into it?

RR: So, going into it, I think that they had talked about the history a little bit, that Catharine Stimpson had founded it. I don't remember who was there between Catharine and Carol, if anyone. I don't know that there was a director between them. [Editor's Note: Catharine Stimpson is a feminist scholar who came to Rutgers in 1980 as an English professor and headed the IRW from 1981 to 1985. Originally called the Women's Studies Institute (WSI), the institute was renamed the Institute for Research on Women (IRW) in 1980-'81, with Stimpson as the inaugural director. The lineage of the IRW traces back to Mary Hartman and others founding the WSI in 1976-'77. Stimpson later became the Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Education. She left Rutgers in 1998 for New York University and is Dean Emerita of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at NYU.]

KR: I do not think there was.

RR: I think it went from Catharine to Carol. [Editor's Note: Lourdes Beneria served as acting director of the IRW in 1986.]

KR: Right.

RR: I didn't know much about the founding of the IRW. I mean, you could tell it was a new institution in the way it was taking on different projects and trying to kind of gear itself up. At the time, I hadn't had--by my last summer, I'd had a course with Catharine Stimpson, who really excited me and got me interested in a lot of things, but I didn't know much about her initially. I was interested in women's writing, but as far as the IRW is concerned--and this is me, this is just the way I think--everything is very compartmentalized. So, my interests were always sort of over here and the IRW is here. I was really interested in what they were doing and working on. I was very interested in getting women's literature into the curriculum, and so that piece I found really fascinating. The other things that they were doing--they had--I think because one year the Laurie Chair was Charlotte Bunch. I think the last year I was there it was Charlotte Bunch, who was not around. I mean, in the summer she wasn't around, but I was aware of her and the influence she had had, and that was interesting. [Editor's Note: Charlotte Bunch held the Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies from 1987 to 1989. She stayed at Rutgers and founded the Center for Women's Global Leadership. Bunch is a Board of Governors Distinguished Professor in Women's and Gender Studies.]

I didn't feel connected to women's global human rights. At the time, that wasn't something that I had been really introduced to, because I had been in the English Department, which is very much about learning about the canon, which was an American and British canon. So, my other interests were primarily around art and art making and poetry. So, there were pieces of what IRW was kind of tangentially involved in that I didn't have much conception of. So, that kind of came later, as I absorbed more of what I was doing at Douglass and more of what was happening in the women's institutes around us. While I was really interested in women's writing, as a poet, I was not solely interested in women's writing. It's interesting now because what I tend to pick up now, as a poet, I'm reading a lot of black writers, a couple Native American writers, women writers. That tends to be what I gravitate towards. So, for whatever reason, I've picked up on those kinds of new voices, and I think a lot of that has been just my own education from working with women students to teaching women's and gender studies.

I had taught "Creative Writing" and I started out being a creative writing teacher. Then, [I] went into women's and gender studies, partly just from working next to the Women and Gender Studies Department, and also working at Douglass, where I was really thinking about how you advise women students. What is the difference between women and men, and is there a difference? What kinds of things do women students focus on? What are some of their preoccupations? What are things they need help with, and how can I be a good advisor? Those kinds of questions. So, at the time I was at IRW, I was not completely immersed in a feminist kind of grounding. I had friends who were, but I wasn't quite there yet. I think that was just that I was just so open to so many different kinds of influences at the time, especially as a writer trying to find my way.

KR: I want to come back to that later, you as a writer and trying to find your way. That is definitely one of the topics I would like to talk about today. Still on the topic of the IRW, we talked about this off the record before we started. For the record, can you kind of give the lay of the land for how the office space was set up in the basement of Voorhees Chapel?

RR: Sure. So, they had, essentially, two offices initially, one that was where the director sat. That was--I'm trying to remember where Carol sat. I'm trying to remember where Ferris sat, where Carol sat, and now I can't remember where Carol's office was. There was kind of a big office to your left, when you come in down that hallway, and then there was an office to the right, and behind that, there's another office. The second year I was there, they had built a partition in the first office to the right, where they had a Xerox machine in the back. I think they've since knocked that partition down again. So, they had kind of divided those offices up. I sat in that first office to the right, which is where Arlene used to work, and I would take over her seat. Then, I remember Ferris being across the hall. I think Carol must have been in the back office, at the time. I can't remember. She may have been--and there was another office next to Ferris' office. It's funny, because I usually remember spatial setups, but I can't exactly remember where Carol sat.

The offices were in the basement of the chapel. It got moldy down there, and there were mice. There was leaves and dirt in the gutters, and I used to sit at a desk and stare at the gutters. It flooded periodically, in which case, it was almost uninhabitable, but we would kind of plow ahead. Facilities would come down and kind of suck up the water. As I said, Ferris would sit in her office with a wool rug that had gotten soaked and smelled terrible, but she had no sense of smell. So, there was that. It was a dingy place to work. The university had not put resources into that space at all, so it was really kind of a sad place. [laughter] It was a happy office situation, but the offices down there were just [dingy], between the mold, the paint on the walls, especially in the offices on the left side when you come down, the paint on the walls was kind of bubbling out. Then, when there was a mouse, you could hear the mouse go from one office to another, because you would hear someone scream in one office. [laughter] Then, you'd hear someone scream in the office next door. Then, you'd hear someone scream in the office next door, which was usually when it had arrived at women's studies, which, at the time, was the Women's Studies Department. So, that was the mouse situation there. [laughter]

The University, at the time, relegated women's studies, and the Institute for Research on Women, and the Program for Women in Math, Science, and Engineering to the basement of this chapel, which they had put almost no work into. I think facilities came one year to clean up the gutters, so that there wouldn't be as much flooding, but there are windows down there in the gutter space and the water would just rush in through the windows, especially on Ferris' side. I remember this, not just from those summers but from working in the same offices when it was the Scholar's Program, you'd hold a trash can under the window and the water would just gush in and fill the trashcan. It was so bad. It was really bad. I mean, the flooding was also all over the hallway when you came down the stairs, and there was carpeting in that hallway, which never got changed or lifted. So, again, the University did really, absolutely as little as possible to fix up that space. So, the way that the women's programs had gotten sequestered in there, it really was--and I hate to use the term ghettoizing--but it was really ghettoizing these offices and devaluing them by placing them in that space.

So, they did a little work--they renovated the end of the hallway--and IRW moved to the end of the hallway by my third year. Those offices got cleaned up, but there was still a lot of problems with flooding and mold in the building, and there still is. We tried to get it renovated for my current office to use, and after a year, we had to stop, because black mold started growing on the sides of the walls down there. So, in some ways, the building is kind of unfixable without putting a lot of money into it. I do remember that right before I started working there, I had to hold off for a week, because they decided that they needed to test radon levels. That was back when there was the initial radon scare, and now I guess its routine, but then they were going around and testing radon levels. The radon levels in that basement were acceptable, which doesn't mean they were like non-existent. [laughter] They were there, but they were just not enough for them to be concerned about. So, there was radon, and also, I think, they didn't want to lift the tiles in the hallway, because there was asbestos. So, it was dingy and kind of creepy down there if you were by yourself, and it remained that way for several years. Right now, it's really not being used much. So, I think IRW and women's studies shared the conference room--there was a conference room down there--and we used it for some events, but most of our work was confined to the offices in the front.

KR: What was the camaraderie like with the staff and faculty at women's and gender's studies?

RR: Well, it was a little hard to tell in the summers, because they were in and out, unless there was someone teaching a summer course. They'd kind of come in and out, and so there wasn't a lot of communication, although they were there enough that I remember we had a couple birthday parties or celebrations where somebody from women and gender studies would be there. Alice Kessler-Harris, I think, was the director at the time. So, she would sometimes be down there. Then there were a couple part-time teachers down there. At the time, women and gender studies was not an actual department; it was a "program." While I think it was one of the strongest programs already in the country, because the programs were just developing all over the place, but it was not a full-blown department. I used to go into their offices sometimes to use their Xerox machine, and I'd always look at the books and sometimes borrow some of the books in there, bring them back, and not let anyone know. [laughter] So, it was very collegial between them. It's just that they weren't there as often in the summer. It was mostly IRW, and Ellen Mappen was down there usually. That was kind of it. [Editor's Note: Alice Kessler-Harris taught as an instructor at Douglass College from 1964 to 1965 and graduated from Rutgers with her Ph.D. in history in 1968. She served as a history professor (1990-1999) and director of the Women's Studies Program (1990-1995) at Rutgers. Kessler-Harris is Professor Emerita of History at Columbia University.]

KR: You talked about the IRW being bureaucratically savvy.

RR: Yes.

KR: Why?

RR: Well, so, Rutgers had all kinds [of regulations]. The regulation I remember the most was that you couldn't purchase anything over a certain amount without using a different kind of

requisition, which took much longer to get approved. So, what they did is they would divide up the money, so that you could use the purchase orders--that had to be under like 250 dollars--for something and then they would just do a few of those, rather than do a big requisition, which would take much longer to get approved if it was approved. So, that was one way they got around things. [laughter] I remember that was, I think, clearest, in terms of how they dealt with things. I don't remember why they wanted to avoid the requisitions, but we would split up the costs of things. So, it would look like we were paying for bits and pieces. I mean, we were paying for bits and pieces of things that would normally be, if you put the expenses together and put them on a requisition form, they'd look a lot more expensive than they appeared.

I can't remember what else they did, but that was one way of getting money approved quickly, money for expenditures approved. That's what I remember most clearly. I think there were a couple other things they did. They had a lot of accounts, also, from grants. I remember having to charge things to different accounts, depending on what they were. So, I imagine that we were splitting things between accounts as well. It may have been that it was just the way that they had to operate in order to get approval for expenses, because, given their new status and the fact that they were a women's institute, I think it was just harder for them to get things approved. So, those were some of the bureaucratic things that I remember.

KR: Who had figured all that stuff out?

RR: I think Arlene probably had figured that out, but Ferris understood it. So, we would kind of talk about how we were going to submit things. Knowing the people who work at Rutgers as administrative assistants, they all figure out their way of kind of dealing with Rutgers procedures. It's much more complicated now. I can't even begin to understand it now. Back then, it was always a form that had carbon copies that you typed on, and then you had to figure out where each different color of the carbon copy went and send them off. I had to do a little bit of that work later when I was in the Scholar's Program as well, although we had an administrative assistant there who did that work. Yes, everything was purchase orders. We had honoraria forms. It was much easier to get someone an honorarium; now, it's a little harder. They have to fill out all these forms. They have to get into this "system" in order for us to pay them, but that didn't need to happen then. Things were just much easier. [laughter] Even if they were not based on technology and they weren't all going through the computer and you had to take things out and send things in, it was just a much more streamlined process. So, the university systems have gotten more and more complicated since I've been here. So, thankfully, I don't have to do that work, although, I always feel, because of my past background in doing kind of administrative work and secretarial types of work, I always feel like I ought to understand the systems, and now I just don't. I just--my brain can't even. You get messages periodically from the Rutgers Marketplace or whatever, and you're like, "What language is this?" [Editor's Note: Rutgers Marketplace is an online catalog ordering system for the faculty and staff of Rutgers University.]

KR: It is confusing.

RR: I know, I know. So, I copy and paste them into Facebook messages now. [laughter] [I] send them off and get these laughing face emojis back. Yes, so, it was much easier. I did

bookkeeping then, which is kind of unbelievable because I can't even do it for myself. There was a lot of bookkeeping there that Arlene did, just because there are the separate accounts, and we had to kind of keep adding up how much was in each account. So, again, it was not glamourous work.

It was good for me to come into this awareness of a kind of burgeoning women's studies movement. The English Department was, at the time, kind of there and not there. I mean, there were a couple courses. Carol taught one on women's literature, and there was another course on women's literature that Marianne DeKoven taught. She's been retired for a while. There were very few courses in women's literature in the English Department, at that time. [Editor's Note: Marianne DeKoven is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers. She taught at Rutgers from 1977 to 2014. DeKoven directed the IRW from 1995 to 1998.]

When I took courses in critical theory, feminist theory was kind of folded in, but it wasn't a separate course. I know one student who did kind of a double degree. She combined her English Department Ph.D. with a women's and gender studies focus. I forget how that worked, but there was some agreement between the departments. I was kind of awakening to that. When I left college, I had taken a course in feminist theory. So, I had that kind of foundation, but, again, I was open to so many different influences. That was really important to me, because it certainly turned me into a feminist, though I didn't clearly identify as a feminist before I took that course. That was in the '80s, early '80s. That was at Vassar, which didn't have a Women's Studies Department. That was the only course I remember on women's anything, the feminist theory course taught out of the Philosophy Department. Somewhere in my mind, I was becoming more aware, but, again, it was sort of compartmentalized. I believed in what they were doing, but there were just a lot of other things going on and ideas that I had. I was really interested in women's literature insofar as it could make inroads into the way that we conventionally thought about things, and it could change the way that we thought about those conventions. That's something that stayed with me and became much stronger throughout my writing career.

When I went to Michigan, it was not something that people talked about, but it was something that I was aware of and that I started to see myself doing in my own work. I was trying to re-steer the way that my poems went, so that they didn't fall into convention and they didn't come up with conventional endings or conventional language. So, I was slightly experimental in my writing. There are a number of feminist poets who because they weren't experimental in their writing, I felt that their use of language really recreated conventional structures. So, I didn't want to be that kind of writer. I wanted to use language in an experimental way, so that it would kind of circumvent any kind of conventional meaning, generally, which is why a lot of people find my poetry difficult to understand. [laughter] Or as one woman, a woman I worked for later, put it--we were having lunch--she said, "Your poems start out a certain way and I think I know where they're going, and then it's like, 'Ha-ha.' They go off somewhere else." I think that that is kind of what I do when I write; I steer things away from what might be a conventional kind of meaning. So, I have terrible problems with like *New Yorker* poems and things that most people read and enjoy. I'm like, "No, no, it's horrible." So, I'm very picky about that kind of thing.

KR: How did you learn how to do that?

RR: When I started at Michigan, I was taking courses with Alice Fulton, who is not a household name. She's a wonderful poet. After I left Michigan, she got a MacArthur Genius Grant. I think on like the first or second day of class, she went around and she said, "What would you all like to work on in your writing?" I said, because people often had a hard time understanding my poems, I said, "Well, I'd like my poems to be more clear, meaning readable," and she said, "Why?" That was like this amazing sense of permission to do what I was already doing, and I had gotten a full fellowship to Michigan, which, at the time, was unusual. Now, they offer it to everyone they accept--they got money from someone--but at the time, they only gave out two, I think, and I had one. So, that was clearly really meaningful to me and one of the reasons I went to Michigan. Alice gave me permission to write in a way that I was already kind of moving towards. It was through that that I had to really think about, "Well, why am I writing this way? What are the implications of this?" because you can't just write poems that people don't understand for no reason. [laughter] You know what I mean? I mean, you have to have a structure, at some point, and it's a theoretical structure, a philosophical structure, which I guess is the same thing. So, I had to really develop my own kind of theoretical structure around what I was doing. I think that was just part of the graduate school experience. We had to write an "Ars Poetica," you know, "Why do we write the way we write?" We had to justify our work a lot in workshops. So, I had to learn how to do that. Even sending things to journals sometimes, I got a call once that said, "Why did you use this word or this phrase?" and I needed to be able to explain, "This is why."

So, I think part of the process of picking up the craft and honing the craft is understanding what it is that your poems are doing. I don't mean that I start a poem and I know what I'm doing, like I don't. I'm just writing the poem, and I'm taking it where it's comfortable for me to take it or where I enjoy taking it. I get some pleasure out of that. I mean, it's hard and that doesn't happen all the time, but when that does happen, it's great. In the long run, I have a sense of grounding in what it is that I'm doing. It's kind of like when you read Wallace Stevens, you don't know what he's getting at. Then, you kind of learn about him and his philosophy and you pick up on certain repetitive themes in his work, and then you kind of get it sometimes. Then, sometimes, I still read Wallace Stevens and I'm thinking, "What the hell is he going on about?" Then, [John] Ashbery was another poet that I liked, and then there were a lot of women experimental poets whose work I really liked, like Lyn Hejinian. There's a poet named Fanny Howe, who's not totally experimental, but she's just a beautiful poet. That's not to say that I don't like poets like Adrienne Rich--Muriel Rukeyser is another poet that I always liked--but I was doing something different, and I knew that I had a kind of grounding and a kind of sense of a project in my work.

Even if the poems aren't about gender or women's experience, I am attuned to the fact that I'm trying to work around certain conventional meaning structures and not reproduce them, which doesn't mean I'm always successful, but that's where I am going with my work. So, I've read some things on my own I think that also got me there, that weren't necessarily part of courses, that were things that I enjoyed, that I discovered, just picking up women's poetry and women writing about their poetry and also just knowing what I liked and what I didn't like.

There's some feminist poets who I don't like, because I feel like they're just terribly predictable. The end of their poem is a restatement of a position that, to me, might be a feminist position, but it's not something that I'm interested in reading, just because I don't feel like poetry should do that. I mean, I don't like poetry that's didactic. There are poets who were really kind of popular

in the early feminist poetry movement, like Marge Piercy and people like that, who I just think were prose writers and not really poets. So, I never was a fan of hers. That might be a feeling of mine. I kind of divided women poets into these two different camps. Part of that was from reading Marjorie Perloff, who wrote a lot about poetry and women's poetry. She talked about those two different kinds of ways of approaching women's poetry, or different ways that women writers approached poetry. I think I picked up a lot about myself from reading that and also had that sense of permission from Alice that I didn't have to write these poems that everyone could just easily digest. So, that's why I think I needed to be open to all these different influences, whether they were male or female or whatever. At the same time, I was able to start grounding my own kind of theory of what I was doing in a feminist framework. I'm not sure people would recognize that, but that's how I think about the poetry as I'm writing it.

My mother never understands what I'm writing. [laughter] That's another thing that I've thought about, with my poetry being difficult for people to understand sometimes. This is a totally different thing, but growing up with a psychologist and a psychiatrist, my biggest fear, growing up, was that they could read my mind. So, anything to get around that, the more obscure I could be the better. So, I think that's another reason why my poetry started to kind of verge towards the obscurity and why I felt like I needed to kind of not be so obscure. Then, I kind of had permission to kind of go with it and see where it went, and that was great. It was really important for me to have that. It didn't mean that workshops were easy, but it meant that I could work, that I had a sense of real support from the program at Michigan.

KR: I have a two-part question. What sort of backlash or critique from professors or people in your cohort did you receive? And then, the second part to that is, did it affect you at all?

RR: So, what I did in the workshop was I identified the people who could read my work--and there were about two of them [laughter]--and then people who I thought were kind of young and just kind of feeling their way and couldn't really read it. At that point, I had already been through a graduate program in English for three years, and so I had more background, I think, in the tradition of poetry and where I was coming in. So, I learned who to listen to and who not to listen to. One of the things that has always been important to me is kind of the music and the sound of poetry, so no matter what I do, I'm attuned to sound. So, the people that I felt could read my poetry were the ones who were responding to the sound and thought that that was important and were also very supportive of that.

Then, the other poets in the workshop, you know, you'd get your poems back every week with comments on them, and I would kind of look at their comments and be [like], "No. I don't think I need to listen to this." Then, there would be the ones that would give me good feedback, and they tended to be older--kind of my age older--and the instructor. That feedback, I would listen to. So, I do what everyone does in a writing workshop, which is that you take what you need from the people that you want to hear from, and then you leave the rest. You leave what you don't need. I think to survive a writing workshop, you have to do that, because you cannot please everybody, and there are all different stages at which people are writing.

We had a funny exercise once where we were assigned to imitate someone else in the class. There was a very young writer. She was just out of college, and normally, I wouldn't say that

was very young, because there were some good writers who were just out of college, but she just seemed very young, as a person. She had gotten my name and I had gotten hers. She tried to imitate a poem of mine, and it was just totally unintelligible and it was kind of funny. I remember doing that kind of spot on imitation of her work and that was kind of like, for me, a secretly pleasing moment, although it was not necessarily pleasing for her. People got right away what I was doing when I imitated her, and then they didn't get what she was doing when she imitated me. [laughter] So, that was just kind of an interesting contrast between some of the writers in workshop and myself.

I valued the teachers there. I think one of the things that got me through--and kind of made it okay and legitimate to write poetry that people didn't quite understand--was the sound was compelling enough that people would stick with the poems. That's always been important to me. I think that's because I grew up playing music, so I had a sense of sound in my head that was important. Sound and imagery, I mean, I grew up around art and music, and so images and music have always crept into my work and been important. That's sometimes how I start writing is by a sound or an image.

I haven't published for a while because I haven't had the time to do the self-promotion that you need to do to publish. So, I published two books, and then I kind of stopped trying to publish. I tried a little bit, because I have a lot of writing. I have a third manuscript, and then I have a fourth manuscript that is almost complete and I'm working on this prose piece about my grandmother's life and generational influences. I want to get back to publishing, but it means being strategic and breaking back in and trying to figure out how that's going to work, because the writing has never stopped. It's just that the self-promotion and constantly sending things out to journals and things like that, it has been really hard with a full-time job, plus teaching on top of it, plus the kind of exhaustion that sets in at the end of the day. I'd rather get the writing done than spend the time on figuring out where to send stuff. So, that's really what I've done. It looks kind of like I stopped writing, but I didn't. [laughter] It's just been kind of like quietly happening, and I have to see what's going to happen with it.

Then, the other thing is that I started to do jewelry and silversmithing. So, I became a jeweler--in the middle of all of that--and that allows me to do a kind of artwork that is really different because I always wanted a craft. I always wanted to learn how to do something that other people couldn't do, like using a torch and soldering and working with silver and metal has been like really fun for me, and I sell things at a couple of places. That gives me a chance to do art that is usable. [laughter] There's something really satisfying to me about that.

So, I grew up in a family with a sense of art as not being anything that you use; it's just something that you look at. I love craft; I love the idea of something that you can create and also use. That combination is really important to me. It's different than poetry, and it's working with my hands. So, I do that as well, but that came later. I mean, that came when I had been working here for a while and had enough money to take the classes that I needed to learn how to do the silversmithing. So, my energies get really divided between all these different things.

I'm kind of waiting to retire--hoping I can retire early--but at this point, it's not a reality. If not, [it's] just making a decision to say, "Okay, now I'm going to focus on sending stuff out," and I

need to kind of do less of the writing and more of the sending out. I haven't quite gotten to that point yet. I actually had writer's block for about a year when I was just feeling so depressed about it that I wasn't able to even approach it. It filled me with a kind of anxiety and anger that I was working and didn't have the time to really do this thing that I felt was my calling. So, I wasn't really approaching it. I always get back into poetry. If I kind of fall out, I get back in by reading new writers. So, I started to read some new writers and started to get back into it, but they have to be new writers that I really respect and like.

KR: You said before that your impetus for writing a poem is a sound or an image. How did your process develop when you were doing your MFA at Michigan and then if you can just trace your process in the years since?

RR: When I was at Michigan, often we would get an assignment which might be to work in a certain form. Usually, my poems would start with a phrase that would come to me and the phrase might not even mean anything to me at the moment, but I would keep kind of playing with it. This is how I teach poetry too. When I teach poetry, I tell students not to worry about what it means, but I tell them to look at a line of the poem and then look at the next line and figure out what it is in that first line that made the poet write the second line. Where's the connection? Is it sound? Is it an image? Is it a word? Where's the association? So, my poetry is associative, but the association could be a sound association, or it could be an image association. Usually, then, it kind of becomes rooted in something that's meaningful to me in my own life and so that enters into the poem, but that's not always [the case]. So, if I say, "I'm going to write a poem about such and such," it almost never happens.

The only thing I've been doing right now is I'm doing a home manuscript on the bones of the body. So, I'm reading through *Gray's Anatomy*, which is really stuffy but beautiful in a way, impossible for me to understand everything. I don't understand everything that he writes, because a lot of it is based on Latin kinds of words for the anatomy of the bone. The way he writes about the bones and the structure is very close to writing about landscape, which is how we talk about bones too. Certain bones are kind of markers. The way bones are described, they're described in terms of like mounds and furrows and sutures and eminences and fissures, and that language is very close to the way we talk about landscape. I can't think right now of the words, but the way someone who does massage therapy, which I don't know much about, they will think about bones and places in the body and how those bones are connected to other places, so the bones have a kind of directional impact or meaning. So, I started playing with landscape and thinking about bones and not writing about bones so much but starting out a poem with bones and kind of riffing on some of the language that Henry Gray used--when he was writing *Gray's Anatomy*--and then it'll go in a different direction. I have to say, some of this--and this probably should be off the record--some of this was inspired--it's the wrong word--but is something I started thinking about after my cousin's suicide. I was somewhat obsessed with the body, the living body, because I was obsessed with my cousin as living and breathing. [Editor's Note: Henry Gray wrote *Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical*, first published in 1858 and commonly referred to as *Gray's Anatomy*. David Oliver Relin, Rebecca Reynold's cousin, was a journalist and author who lived from 1962 to 2012.]

KR: Do you want me to stop it?

RR: You can record.

KR: We can record and you can redact it from the transcript, because you will be approving your transcript. You will be reading it over and proofing.

RR: Yes, okay.

KR: When you re-read it, if you want to take it out, take it out.

RR: So, I just started to think about how our bodies are fragile, and they are kind of a structure that can be blown apart. That, I think, is what got me into thinking about bones, the idea of blunt force trauma. Usually, you think about that happening to the head, and the first thing that I did was I started looking at the bones in the head. I just started to kind of write about them. He chose a place in Oregon that was a beautiful place, and so there was also this emotive landscape there. So, I was kind of interested in the fact that the bones and landscape were similarly talked about. There's a metaphor of landscape in the way that we talk about bones.

That had been an impetus that was kind of behind how that started, but then it took on a life of its own. Then, it was just kind of like I was really riffing off the different bones. I was not trying to have any allegiance to the actual anatomy. I just went off and into my own direction, but the poems are each named with a bone and I use some of the language from *Gray's Anatomy*. So, there are a couple poems in that manuscript that do refer obliquely to my cousin's death but not explicitly in any way. I think even the oblique reference may be too much. So, I may need to take that out, but I have to think about it. [laughter]

Again, I'm not a topical poet. If someone says, "Write about such and such." I'm like, "That's not going to happen," because I could start and then it'll go somewhere else. I have done it and people have liked the results, but they're not things that I would normally put in a book. Maybe another book of poems that are actually about things that people understand. [laughter]

Back to IRW, I was just becoming aware of this kind of world and this whole kind of area of study. In graduate school, I became really interested in critical theory, and when I took Catharine Stimpson's class we read Gertrude Stein, who I got really interested in. I would never ever write like Gertrude Stein, but I do think a lot about what she was thinking about when she was writing. She was kind of thinking about the indestructibleness of language in a lot of ways and how grammar is indestructible. I wrote a paper on her book on grammar, which is totally not about grammar, but it is about grammar. It's about trying to destroy it and not being able to, because no matter what you do, there's some grammatical logic in it. That kind of influenced me. It was a course on Stein and Stevens. I had already been reading Stevens and was connected to Stevens just because I loved the sound of Stevens. I don't necessarily like him as a person, but Stein was more of an influence in terms of theorizing about poetry in my own poetry. So, I was taking off on those modernist writers and going in a different direction, I think, or just going in my own direction. I would say, my poems are not unintelligible. They're probably much easier to read than a lot of Stevens and a lot of really experimental writing. I wouldn't necessarily class myself with avant-garde writers who really are experimenting with form a lot.

I still get comments from sort of the everyday readers around me who say they don't understand the poems. I think it's partly of because they're not poets. I mean, I do know poets who like my poetry and are interested in it, but I think it might be that I kind of write for poets. There is, one poet--I think William Stafford, maybe another poet--[who] said, "Write for people who are smarter than you," which I always thought was great. It was this idea that you could kind of write something and say, "Okay, I don't totally get what this is about but somebody will." [laughter] So, I think of that a lot too.

I think, most of my education happened through reading on my own, after graduate school. It was kind of a relief to read again, after grad school, because I was reading what I wanted to read. What I didn't like about Rutgers was that the focus on writing was just, "Write a very conventional academic paper," and I just so did not want to do that, that I knew that wasn't something I wanted to continue with. I struggled over papers, because I didn't have that kind of conventional--even at Vassar, I was not a very conventional writer, but I got kind of rewarded for that, which was probably a mistake, but anyway. [laughter] At Rutgers, I knew that I couldn't do that. To write a paper, reading about an author and reading about their poetry and some of the writing is just--the academic writing is so dry. It's kind of like you're expected to learn how to do that before you do anything else. I knew I just didn't have the patience to go through that. The other thing that I didn't quite have was that in order to do literary criticism, you have to really dig in and critique who you're writing and understand everything. I always wanted parts of literature and poetry and my own writing to be a mystery, because the mystery was what locked me in. Once something stopped having a mystery to it, it kind of lost its resonance for me. In my own work and in work that I really like, I'm kind of looking for where the work takes on a kind of mysteriousness, like, how did the writer get from this to this? I don't think about it that way, but I think that's partly what's going on somewhere unconsciously. That's a kind of beauty that is a little inexplicable, and I want it to be inexplicable.

I don't want to be a critic in any kind of conventional way, because I want things to remain kind of open. There are a lot of things, in retrospect--at the time, I wasn't that clear about it--but, in retrospect, I thought, "These were some of the things that were keeping me from really fully embracing an academic program." So, I always felt like I was slightly on the margins, kind of trying to fit in but not really wanting to. Anyway, it was just clear to me, after a couple of years, that I needed to do an MFA program. I didn't expect to end up back at Rutgers. I was interested in teaching creative writing, but I didn't really want to be in an academic setting, and yet it's been really satisfying to be at a university. It's been satisfying to be in an academic setting, because I am reading and keeping up with what's happening in the academic world in ways that I probably wouldn't have done had I not taken a job here.

Then, teaching an intro course in women's and gender studies, that's fun because of the interaction with the students and the way they kind of have these "ah ha" moments. What I read on my own is usually not what I teach, but it might be about teaching. I mean, I like bell hooks' work on teaching and thinking about pedagogy and how to teach, because I think I enjoy thinking about perception and how people think, which is something I also like about advising is talking to a student about how we think and/or kind of trying to figure it out with them, so that we can kind of figure out where they might want to go academically or professionally and where

their strengths are. So, I think that interest in perception and learning and all those things are kind of related to writing and related to reading and my own learning process. [Editor's Note: Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as her pen name bell hooks, is an American poet, feminist, and educator. She has taught at several universities.]

I think I've always been a kind of self-learner; when I am really doing the most learning, it's when I'm reading on my own. That's how I went through high school and--not so much college--but certainly post-grad school. The first book I read when I was out of grad school was--I had picked up a book by John Cage, who is a musician but he also writes. He was a really experimental musician. I don't know if you know John Cage. You've probably heard of what he's done. He did a piano piece that is essentially--I think it's eleven minutes of silence. So, it's nothing for eleven minutes. [laughter] I mean, so he did stuff like that, and he was married to Merce Cunningham, the dancer, who is a choreographer. He sometimes did the music for his work. So, his work is very experimental, but he also wrote and he wrote in this completely kind of--he would impose some form on it but it was just so open. It gave me so much pleasure to be able to read something like that that was so not academic, and yet it had depth to it and a lot of resonance for me, in terms of thinking about how you kind of split apart meaning and convention and expectations. I found that to be really interesting, and that's still interesting for me.

It's interesting to do that to students sometimes too, [laughter] to just sort of say something that takes them by surprise where they have to really think. Then, sometimes, it's playing devil's advocate, but it's fun to sometimes play around in classes and kind of do that to get people to think outside the box. So, all of these things, sort of, I connected throughout the years, because I was thinking, "Why am I working full-time as an advisor?" A lot of those years, I wasn't teaching, especially when I was a dean. Before the TUE here, Douglass had its own requirements, its own deans, and I was the dean for seniors and transfer students and students on academic probation. I really was just doing heavy advising all day long. I had to really think about, "Why do I like doing this?" because I do like it, but I was exhausted by it. That exhaustion in those years, that's when I stopped trying to publish. [Editor's Note: TUE refers to "Transforming Undergraduate Education," or the reorganization of undergraduate education at Rutgers-New Brunswick under President Richard McCormick.]

My last book came out in 2002, which is a really long time ago, and I started working as a dean in 2000. After I was in the dean's office, the book that came out in 2002 was already mostly written and done, but I still had some work on it. After that, I was just so tired from just the day that I wasn't trying to do anything but get up early and write. I've been doing that for a pretty long time, aside from times when I've really kind of had either writer's block--not writer's block so much--I guess I call it just like anxiety attacks, where I'm just so anxious I can't even approach it. So, it's been pretty constant, but I also had to find a way to connect things that I was doing, because I thought, "I'm doing this. I'm not doing things that other poets do," in terms of like teaching and getting tenure track positions teaching, partly because that would require leaving the area, and I have a lot of ties to the area. I mean, it would mean applying to places all over the world, and I like being settled. I like knowing where my paycheck is coming from every year and not having to kind of play the adjunct game and not having to move around a lot. So, my own kind of need for some security, I think, has kept me here, but I did need to kind of figure out, "Well, why am I doing these things?" So, I strung it together. I mean, I found a way to kind

of figure out what was intellectually satisfying about all these different things. Otherwise, I think I would go crazy. [laughter] So, I created my own kind of structure for why I do this and this and why they're connected. None of this is about IRW. [laughter]

KR: I have a few more questions about the IRW.

RR: Yes.

KR: But I will come back to that later.

RR: Yes.

KR: So, you get up early and write.

RR: Yes, I get up early and I read the *Times* online, and then I write for a while, often just revising, doing a lot of revision. Then, I get dressed and go to work, and then I get home from work. I am usually so tired, I can't do jewelry making, I can't do anything. I can read sometimes after I've had a break, but if I've been sort of talking to students, teaching, looking at the computer all day--like all those things together--I'm pretty worn out by the end of the day. I'll watch television and kind of fall asleep on the couch. I watch really bad TV, not always, not always. Also, after Trump got elected, I couldn't watch anything serious. [laughter] This is too depressing.

KR: There are articles written about that. I think that is a constant across America.

RR: The only thing is *The Handmaid's Tale*, which I have been faithful to, which some people can't even bear to watch, but I like the way that it's done and the acting. Sometimes I just sit watching Netflix on the computer, sitting on my lap. So, I don't even turn on the TV. I'll kind of go back, if I have the computer sitting on my lap, I might go back and forth from some other task but not work related. [Editor's Note: Based on Margaret Atwood's work, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a Hulu series.]

KR: Where do you write your poetry and then where do you do jewelry making?

RR: So, I used to always have a place in my house with a desk that looked outside, and that's where I would write, but lately, I've started--we bought a La-Z-Boy chair and it's a nice-looking La-Z-Boy chair. It's not like a big leather monstrosity. It's like a wing-back chair. I found that sitting there, I can write there. It's in the living room; the living room is a mess because I have a table that I've just piled up all these books on. So, I have a study upstairs that I use and my partner uses it to kind of store files in, but I tend not to use the study. I sit in this La-Z-Boy and write.

Then, I have a jewelry studio that I've created in the basement. So, we had an unfinished basement. We still have an unfinished basement. We had to have it waterproofed, because it flooded when we moved in. So, we spent a lot of money getting it waterproofed and putting in French drains and all of that, a sump pump. When we moved in, it had a work table that went

around like two sides of the room, like one of those really big, old, thick wooden work tables, which was great. So, I just use that. I don't have a jeweler's bench, which you're kind of supposed to use because there's a certain height that you're supposed to use for sawing out patterns and things like that, if you're using a jeweler's saw. So, I've adjusted to sort of using the saw at a lower point, which is fine. I mean, it works for me.

The only problem is we have a cat that uses the basement as one big litter box. So, before I can do any work, I have to go down there, I have to clean, which kind of gets me in the mood to work. It's like I have to do this clean up, and that usually takes twenty minutes to half an hour. We put down pads for her; it's not as bad as it sounds. She goes on puppy pads, and then she's very funny because she folds the paper over. [laughter] So, I always know if she's used the pad, because it's folded. [laughter] We also store a lot of stuff down there. It's not an ideal place to work, but that cat is getting old and part of me is like, "Oh, maybe she'll die soon." [laughter] We have laundry down there and we have other stuff down there, so we do have to keep kind of cleaning up the pads and then we put new pads down. She only goes on the pads. She won't use her box. There's a box down there for her. She doesn't like the box. She won't use--we have three cats--she won't use the boxes that the other cats use, but she will use the puppy pads. It's kind of gross, but it's easy to clean up. It's not that bad.

My workspace is a mess. I mean, I tend to do better when things are a little chaotic, in terms of being creative and thinking about things and putting things together, even in poetry. I have a pile of books and some papers and things on a little table, and they're all kind of about to fall off but not falling off. I have a lamp, and it's like my corner. I don't always watch TV, because I like to sit in my corner and do things from there. My wife has completely given that over to me; she knows that's my spot.

Then, when my mother comes--because she has a hard time getting up and down from chairs--that's where she sits. So, we partly got the chair for her, but it's become my chair mostly. [laughter] There's a big living room window there. I like having the view outside, when I'm writing, to kind of stare out and think about the sky and just the seasons. That's kind of important for me to have a view of something. So, if I'm going to try to send stuff off, my printer is up in the study--well, actually, you don't even need to print anything to send things out. If I need to really do work and kind of isolate myself from what's going on in the household and not see the mess, then I'll go up to my study. I try to keep that in a pretty orderly condition, so I can feel calm there. When I moved into this office, I've been trying to keep the desk clear, because I used to have my desk covered with papers. Now, I try to keep the papers off the main surface of the desk, so I feel more structured and like I have more room to think. I don't spend as much time losing things, which I always used to just lose everything and then spent all this time trying to find it.

With a poem, with jewelry, with everything, I often make a mess or do something really unsuccessful before I can do something that works. The other thing I do when I'm writing is I will do fragments and just put them together. So, the poems are sometimes, one of my friends called them tapestries, and I think a lot of my poems are kind of tapestries. Even the shorter poems are sometimes fragments that are kind of put together. I like the idea of the metaphor of sewing things together. I don't sew; it's the one thing I don't do. I actually took some of my

books--because I had a whole box of my books that I was supposed to be going out and doing readings and selling, but I wasn't doing that--so I took some of the books and I actually cut them and sewed pages together and made figures and put pictures in and played around with that. Then, I didn't know what to do with them, so I have a bunch of those. They're kind of little art objects. Yes, so, that's how I work. Even with jewelry, I put things together. I'll see something that's sitting on the work table, and I'll say, "Okay, that would look really good with this," even though I hadn't thought about it that way, and put them together.

Yes, I think I have worked hard to try to feel like what I do in my life is interrelated, that things are kind of connected. I don't know if they really are, but I need to think of them that way in order to make sense of my life and where it's going. For a long time, I thought I just wasted all this time working. Tillie Olsen wrote this book called *Silences*, where she writes about writers. It's an old book; I mean, I read it in college. She writes about the way the writers' lives get interrupted by the need to do work and earn money. If you had to pay me to read that book again, I would not read it, because it's so depressing for me to see that because it's like, "This is what I've done." So, I have to get away from thinking that way. I have to think, "Okay, you know, things will come together; I just have to figure out when and how and make that effort to make that happen." I'm getting there now; I mean, in my own head, I've been working that out a lot. So, it's kind of like restarting with the publishing and working out ways to do that.

Also, thinking about getting older and how a lot of--I mean, this is true in the publishing world--like a lot of younger poets get published and their first couple books will come out and then the third book, nobody will pick it up. That's a phenomenon that happens, and it's just hard to deal with. My third manuscript, I did send out to a bunch of contests, which is one way to kind of enter your manuscript, to send it to publishers, because a lot of publishers don't take unsolicited manuscripts, so that's a way of getting them read. I got a couple of bites on them as runner up, but then nothing. So, that started to feel hopeless, so I stopped doing that. Now, I'm trying to think about doing more research on publishers that allow unsolicited manuscripts, and I think there are a bunch of presses that will take them. That's the next step.

KR: You are an award-winning poet.

RR: [Yes].

KR: In 1991, you won the Avery Hopwood Award for Poetry.

RR: Yes, at Michigan.

KR: Can you tell the story behind that?

RR: Yes, everybody in my workshop entered. Everybody in both years--it's a two-year MFA--so everybody enters either fiction or poetry. The two judges that year were Diane Wakoski, who writes the kind of feminist poetry that I don't really like, and then Stephen Dunn, who is another poet who I really don't like very much. [laughter] I had met him, because I had attended a Bennington Writers Workshop one summer, where he was teaching, although I didn't take his

workshop. But I knew his work. Some of it's quite lovely but in a way that he kind of objectifies women.

I didn't expect to get an award, and then they just have you go to an assembly where they give out the award. They have some awards for undergraduates. I think three of us won the Hopwood Award that year, and so I was pleasantly surprised to get the award. That was a nice moment and a nice validation and everything was nice, and then I read the comments in the manuscripts and they were just really mean. It was really bizarre. Other people, who didn't win anything, also said that they had gotten these really negative comments back. So, I think what happened was the judges had kind of--I mean, they weren't all mean, they said some nice things. I'm guessing that the faculty at Michigan made the final decisions based on who they kind of liked, and they may have used some of the judge's comments. [laughter] Wakoski was very focused on--I had written a poem about Giacometti figures--and she was focused on the fact that I didn't write about it in the way that art historians talk about Giacometti and so that I had gotten the meaning wrong of Giacometti's work, which was like that's not what poetry is supposed to do. So, that was baffling, why would she get obsessed with that? That was all she could talk about. Then, Stephen Dunn was just sort of like, "Some nice phrasing in here." [laughter] [Editor's Note: Alberto Giacometti was Swiss sculptor and painter who lived from 1901 to 1966.]

I never asked anyone, "Why? How did I win this award." Anyway, it happened, and I think there was some faculty intervention in that process. That might happen every year, because that Hopwood Award has been around at Michigan for a long time. It's like a famous award at Michigan. So, I was happy I won it, and then later that happiness was kind of tempered by the fact that the critiques were so bizarre that I can't explain the poetry world business. It's beyond me. That was a good validation for me too, because I was aware that some of my poetry was difficult for people to understand and maybe not award-winning poetry or the type of poetry that would win an award.

KR: You won an award for your first book.

RR: Yes, and that was much more gratifying because Ann Lauterbach was the judge, and she's somebody whose poetry I really like and admire. It's interesting, it's weird, because instead of feeling like really happy about it, I felt incredible anxiety around it. I don't know exactly why that happened. I think the sense of being read, somehow it caused a lot of anxiety. I think if you write a book, you're done with it and you kind of put it away and it becomes like this thing of the past. Then, all of a sudden, it won this award, and my publisher was really, really happy, because it was a relatively new press, [New] Issues Press, out of Western Michigan University. So, they were really happy about that, but I felt this very strange sense of anxiety around it. I was pleased, but I felt very nervous and anxious about it. [Editor's Note: Rebecca Reynolds won the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America for *Daughter of the Hangnail,* published by New Issues Press in 1997.]

We went to the ceremony where you get the award, and I brought my partner at the time, a friend and my mother. I remember that this woman who was one of the editors of *American Letters and Commentary* said--she lived in a really small apartment--so she said, "You can come and bring one guest but no more than one guest." So, I was like, "I can't come then. I can't go,

because I have three other people that I have to be with." I remember feeling upset and angry about that. I am really proud of that award, and at the same time, I remember, just at the time, it made me feel anxious. I was upset that I couldn't go to this party, because I knew the other editor of that journal. It was like one of those complicated evenings in New York, where you're trying to find a place to eat and no one can agree and you kind of go and it's like everybody's getting more hungry and more grouchy. So, that was before the event. I finally just said, "Okay, we're going here." We went to the hotel and we ate. We got dinner and it was fine, but it was just a weird experience. [laughter]

I was pleased with that, and I got little gold stickers that I could put on the book covers, which I still have somewhere. [laughter] I'd also gotten a state arts grant before that book came out, where I got some money, and with the New Jersey Council of the Arts, if you get a grant, you have to show them what you're going to spend the money on. Since I had a job, what I managed to do then, which would probably be impossible now, but I got one of the associate deans to allow me to take off extra time during the summer to write. So, that's how I used the money really.

Then, I also was house sitting for Ferris that summer. That's a different story, a really different story, because they had a ferret. They had a ferret, an iguana and a very large dog, and it was a lot of making sure that the ferrets didn't get out of the girl's room and the iguana didn't get out of its cage, which it did. I had to find it, and pick it up and put it back in, which was disgusting. I was like, "I don't want to touch the iguana." That was all that summer. [laughter]

I had a lot of extra time off to get work done. What I did is I took a lot of really long rides in the countryside. I didn't work as much as I would deliberately get lost. This was pre-GPS. I mean, that's how long ago that was. So, I'd get lost in Hunterdon County, which is beautiful land. It's all Republicans, but it's like really pretty and so I would kind of get lost and keep going until I found like Route 206, which I knew. So, I could always get myself home. I had an internal radar device, but I would kind of take these back winding roads and discover these really beautiful places. What happened is that summer I kind of fell in love with New Jersey, which was kind of the result of this grant. [laughter] I did write every morning. I was really clear, "I've got to write," but I also found out that I can't write all day. I can write in the morning for a little while, and then it's done. I've got to regroup for the next day and get up early the next day and write, but I can't spend all day writing. That's not how my mind works, especially because I do tend to write in kind of fragments and then put them together. If I try to spend all day writing, I'm going to just run out of steam. I took these long rides in the countryside and got lost. Another thing I do when I'm working on a poem and I get stuck is I either take a walk or a drive to just go over a phrase or something that's come to me and try to come up with something with the next line. It was all part of the process. [laughter]

KR: Was the result of that your second book?

RR: I think that was right before the first book came out. The poems in the first book were probably already written for the most part. So, they were a combination of a couple of poems I had written before the MFA program, poems from the MFA program, very carefully culled, and

then poems during the first couple years that I worked in the Honors Program at Douglass. That job was not as intense. I had a lot of work, but I didn't feel as exhausted from it.

So, I was able to put together the manuscript and was kind of introduced--I had, ironically, an ex-boyfriend who [was] the guy I came back here with because I was living with him, and he had gotten a job at Western Michigan and met this guy, Herb Scott, who was a poet and was the director of New Issues Press. Mark showed him my manuscript and he was interested, so he asked me to send him my copy of the manuscript, which was a little different. Then, he said, "Get rid of these ten poems and add ten new poems." So, I had to write new poems for that book. I did it relatively quickly, I think, because I was like, "Oh, my God, I have to do this to get something published," but I liked the new poems that I wrote for the book.

Herb was really taken by my work. He was really, really supportive, and so he wanted my second manuscript. I was like, "Great," and I had enough poems then. He kind of did the same thing, "Take these out; put the new ones in." In the middle of all that, he got brain cancer, and the people that took over were--after he was in the hospital, I was dealing with a lot of grad students who were kind of taking over the office in his absence. That was okay. The only problem was I hated the cover. I'll show you the cover. I have the books here. I hated the cover. The first book won an award for the cover as well as the award for the first book. That was the first book.

KR: For the record, Rebecca is showing the cover of *Daughter of the Hangnail*.

RR: I talked to the artist who was a grad student in--or maybe even an undergraduate--in graphic design, and I said, "These are some of the things that I think about." Interestingly, the bones, he picked up on that. I'm not sure I said bones, but he picked up on that from reading the poems. That book won an award for the cover and the typeset, a small press award. Then, I got the first book award. Then, the second book, I talked to an artist and told him, "These are some things I was thinking about." Then, they put together this cover, which I absolutely could not stand, and because I couldn't stand the cover, I had a really hard time promoting the book. It was really difficult for me to do that, so I gave a couple readings, but then I didn't. I think part of it also was that Herb was really sick, and then he was in remission for a while and then he died. He was away through the whole process, and I didn't have his support and advice. So, I felt like the second book came out in this void, and I felt this absence of his support at that time. Then, after it came out, he was like, "I want your third book," and then he died. So, I was lucky to get these published by Western Michigan Press, because this series is now only for Michigan writers, so I need to find a new publisher. I mean, they still exist--they've been going strong--but I can't publish with them anymore.

KR: For the record, how would you describe this cover?

RR: So, there's nothing here that I talked to the guy about. What I don't like is the shadow of the woman because it looks like the head is elongated and flattened out. Artistically, I have a hard time with this shape. I think that the guy who did that first book cover read the poems and struggled to figure out what they were about--because I had a short conversation with him--but found themes, somehow, that helped him put together a cover, which is kind of bone-like and

kind of pipe-like. It's interesting, I'm not sure how he came up with the image. This second book, and I actually like the poems in this book much better, I think this picture that they put on the inside was kind of what I talked about. I talked about leaves and stitching things together. The stitching and the leaves were some of the themes that I talked to the artist about, who used images of winter with a shadow of a woman's head. I think I did mention buttons and stitching, because I was thinking about how you put things together. That was the second book. When the second book came out though, I didn't work very hard to promote it. I was angry at the cover. [laughter] So, I sort of sabotaged myself with the second book.

KR: In your first book, the poem *Daughter of the Hangnail* is also the title of the book. Why is that the title?

RR: So, I was thinking a lot about women and imperfection and really simply speaking, that there's a certain need to be perfect. I was thinking about not being perfect and having loose ends and life being a series of loose ends. So, that was the title for the poem, and Herb actually picked that out for the title of the book. My parents gave me a lot of grief over that title. [laughter] My mother actually dealt with it okay. No, my mother said, "I hate the title." She did say that. [laughter] These are my parents. My father's wife thought it was about her, which is really far from the truth. The title of that book was like a litmus test for all these people around me to see how they would psychologically respond. It was how they kind of thought things were about them. I'm not going to pick that up. [Editor's Note: The telephone is ringing.]

KR: Sure.

RR: Okay, I'll call her back.

KR: Do you want to take a break?

RR: No, I'm okay. I'm fine.

KR: Okay, sure.

RR: Unless you need a break.

KR: Oh, no, I am okay.

RR: Okay.

KR: You were saying the litmus test.

RR: Yes, the way that people responded to the cover was kind of how they projected themselves onto the book, and it was just kind of interesting, though I was pretty pissed at my mother, at the time, for saying she hated the title, because I'm like, "If only I had chosen a title for you." [laughter] It's funny, because when I was writing the poem and then the title became the title of the book, I was not thinking about my parents at all. I was really not there. My mind was just thinking about other things, and then all of a sudden the title became about my parents. It was

like, "No, it's not about them at all." It's really about feeling imperfect and not completely whole. That was where the title had come from.

KR: One of my questions that I was going to ask you, that I did not ask you because you answered it, was how do you get people to read your poetry. That is kind of like a two-parter. How do you get people to read a book of poetry, but how do you get someone to actually start a poem and finish a poem? You explained that in your own way about how your words and the sound keep people going, and I can see that in *Daughter of the Hangnail.* Would you mind reading it for the record?

RR: Sure, I mean it's a multi-part poem. I can just read the first page.

KR: Sure.

RR: "Freeman left me on the expressway, so I had to book it with the fucking diapers. Lost, I might add, like a tune from God. What you don't see won't hurt you. Flurries of pollen, exhaust, lines connecting equal points of sunlight. Sound, one had to let the sound out of her mouth in order to become fully human. Equal parts water and flesh, the noise like a glyph, the slap of shape on air. The air as paper, but the paper tremulous, a little dismantling in the box where the word severs, flesh of my flesh. The man yelling mama by the exit ramp." It goes on from there.

I'll read the second part--I kind of like that part--and then I'll stop. "I think of this as the city of heaven. Heaven descending in powdered form. So, you take all the wings and larva, blue bottle flies, soap bugs, moths and other species glued to the underside of rudimentary flora in an empty lot. The vigorous weed and gall body. chicory, dozens of washers propelled to the gutters and slivers of milk glass, discarded needles, the treacherous sand, the collapsed condom, terra and firma of the dislocated barrel and loose strife."

What's actually interesting about that poem is that the scene that I was imagining was the route along on 18, before they built all the apartment buildings. It was just empty lots, and I used to walk to work. When I worked at IRW, I walked along Route 18 and past all those empty lots, and they used to have discarded needles, a lot of chicory flowers, like weeds kind of growing in them, and there were always truck parts. I found washers everywhere, big ones, on the side of the road. So, I was taken with that. Sometimes, men would yell at me when I was walking along, so it was sort of a combination of different associations. But, yes, very much that scenery--at the time, along Route 18, before it got developed--and walking to IRW from way down in Highland Park, where I had an apartment. [laughter] So, it has a funny tie back to that. [laughter]

KR: Do you have a favorite poem or a poem that you think you will be known for?

RR: I don't know. I think if I pushed the second book, there are poems in there that I like a lot. You're welcome to take those books.

KR: Oh, thank you.

RR: I have like tons of them. I think there were some poems in there--I don't know that I'd be known for them, because I think that my poems are sort of, to me, I kind of write in batches. So, there'll be a batch of poems about one thing and a batch about another and a batch about another. Within those batches, they're kind of interconnected. So, I don't know if they're poems that would become known. I do like the title poem for that book. That was based on an actual dream, which is an assignment that I give students, to write a poem about a dream but without saying it's a dream. [laughter] Do you want me to read it?

KR: Yes.

RR: Okay, sure. *The Bovine Two-Step.* "A woman had trained cows and bulls in a travelling act. Oh, garland of fury. I was linked to extravagant organs, the five dancers feathered and pearled a la Josephine Baker. The compliant dogs who herded us, who were blessed with these marvelous repositors of dung. There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful. Nature, so clouded with scat. The wild carrot. Me and my dancing shoes, among the most sordid and delicate of observations. A strange progress, the body fixed to the spirit and the spirit following like the mammoth discerning, describing its own design. The skin flank, glimmering heart, liver scent, and hoof, how I dreamed of it in the blossomy fog. How I had no possessions but this dream." I had a little fun with that. [laughter]

KR: Thank you.

RR: I did say it was a dream in that poem though. [laughter] I tell students not to, because they overuse the word dream all the time.

KR: That is okay. You are published. You can use dream in your poems. [laughter]

RR: There's an angry work poem in there too. Occasionally, I would have an angry work poem. I'll show it to you. I won't read it.

KR: Rutgers inspired?

RR: Yes. [laughter] I wasn't a dean then when I wrote the poem. I was still in the Honors Program. In the Honors Program, my initial title was administrative assistant, but my job was basically assistant to the director. I did all the advising, and I also had a programming board, where I set up programs. I did a women's poetry reading series. The deans at the time--I was trying to get an upgrade, and I was very annoyed because the upgrade had sat on this--it was an interim dean and it sat on her desk and she didn't hand it into human resources. I got very upset with her.

Then, they took us all out to lunch at the Rutgers Club, and it was like they were trying to--things were very hierarchical, which was so different than the IRW, where everybody was treated equally. I taught a little bit at the Institute for Women's Leadership and everybody was treated like an equal, but at Douglass, at the time, it was very top down. I felt that all the time, and it used to drive me up the wall. In this poem, where the deans take us all out to lunch, it was like

this was their one thing that they did to try to make people feel like they were valued, but the rest of the time it was just not like that. So, it's called *Shadow Box*. Do you want me to read it?

KR: Sure.

RR: "We lunch in a club with gold stars, linens unbloom. The secretary to my left forks through red bib lettuce. Like me, she sees her father in the stems, but thinks it impolite to refuse food when the bosses are treating. So, we all end up eating of our own kind. The most vibrant meal we have ever tasted, by the way, and say so, you know this is so tender and look, the ceiling is imprinted with leaves. Noon stirs through the blue and white curtains, we are all pronounced medium or rare as primly as a twig angles through snow, or cars ribbon the distant bridge. It is said that professional women should wear their hair above their shoulders. Think of growing your hair so long, you need to reel it home. Yes, it is difficult to think with all that hair. So difficult, because as you would imagine, the electrolytes are damned inside the roots like mammals who encounter a sudden waterfall or rock. Who am I? That is the question that deserves to be lopped off. For so often, one is replaceable. Another reason for stashing nuts in the jowls or eating one's immediate family. Not to be gladdened by the thought of oneself in the meadow, when the clover unfolds, or the burdens are expressed by insects with humorously rapid wings that swarm your lips, fairyish, eager. Not to be impressed by survival. Not to be aroused by the city. Not to love an atelier. Nor to imagine that dim, sickly creator in the horse blur of shadow, pitched against the wall by a candle, where the animal encounters a yellow wall and ignores the flame. Studying the geometry of shadow. 'Your sight will wish to be in a spot exactly through a hole, placed where the light passed,' Leonardo wrote. While the model is stripped naked at the vanishing point." Yes, that was an angry at work poem. [laughter]

KR: Thank you for reading it.

RR: Yes. As you can see, I interweave a lot of other things in it, and that's kind of common. I always thought that people would like that poem. I mean, just the sort of like kind of ironic, kind of black anger humor in it that is part of being in an organization that operates in a certain way.

KR: Yes, anyone who is a peon doing scut work will definitely appreciate that.

RR: Yes. [laughter] So, yes, that was my feeling at the time, just deeply annoyed.

KR: Well, let's talk about your coming back to Rutgers.

RR: Okay.

KR: You have talked about working at the Honors Program.

RR: Right.

KR: You have talked about that a couple of times, and I was wondering if you could just talk about your overall job there and then trace your career at Rutgers.

RR: Overall, my job there was really mostly advising students. The director of the program did some advising, but she could be very blunt with students in a way that scared them. So, I think that they needed somebody like me who was really interested in learning about them. I was learning about the University at the same time, so I was learning about resources. I learned that the best way to help students is to listen to them, and sometimes just looking something up--we had actual paper catalogs then--looking something up in the catalog. So, I remember helping a student put her courses together, and that student was just so grateful to me, just for doing something that involved looking through the University catalog and kind of helping her figure out what she wanted to take. We, occasionally, are still in touch, and that was a long time ago. She went to Harvard Law and she hated it there but ended up working in disability law. I'm not sure what she's doing now, but I think she's in D.C. I haven't had any contact with her for a while, but maybe five or six years ago we connected about something. So, it's interesting, because there are a few students that I've kept in touch with.

Yes, I really learned that the first important thing was listening, and I was good at that. I mean, a lot of people are, but I think [it's] really kind of not just listening but hearing what people were saying. These students were all kind of overachieving, but that didn't mean that they knew what they were doing. They needed the same kind of guidance that any other student would need. So, I would talk to them about choices, and I also was really interested in what they thought and what they liked to think about and kind of trying steer them towards maybe doing research or maybe majoring in something that was related to that. That's still something that I do.

I like to kind of find out how people think. Are they quantitative thinkers? Do they think about human rights? Do they like to think about business? What is it that they really kind of want to get to dig in to? A lot of students don't come with a sense of discovery. They don't feel like they are going to discover something. They just feel like they're going to have to choose something and do it. So, I do like to instill them with a sense that they can discover something about themselves and about the way that they think and how their intellect works.

When I came back here from Michigan, I was very uncomfortable being at Rutgers, because I felt like, "I left Rutgers, what am I doing here?" I was teaching creative writing and felt really uncomfortable just being in the English Department to pick up mail. So, I didn't teach after that first semester, because I just didn't want to be around the English Department. There were still people that I knew--some of whom were friends but some of whom I disliked and I didn't want to be around--that were in the English Department.

I stayed on Douglass and did the advising thing, and the one good thing about my boss, at the time, if she was going to a meeting, she would always bring me with her. So, I learned a lot about what people were thinking about in the dean's office, and at that point, I was a peon and my title was below what I was actually doing. I mean, it took me a while to figure out how to get my job upgraded, but I did eventually get it upgraded. [laughter]

Then, I did go back to teaching creative writing kind of like once a year, once every other year, not on a continual basis. It was harder to teach creative writing here, at that time, because they didn't really have a big department, and students didn't take it very seriously. So, it was difficult

to get students to do any reading. They wanted to write and they wanted to write things that were pretty schlocky.

It was different than Michigan. I taught at Michigan and students had this really rich creative writing kind of history and resources and a reading series and things like that, so they had [a] much better sense of what was real literature. The students at Rutgers, usually, there were like two or three people in the class who were really writers. Some of them knew it and some of them had no idea, and that was always exciting to kind of say, "You're a really good writer" to someone who didn't know it. Other people in the class were trying to get a requirement done, thought it would be a gut course, wouldn't do any of the reading, and it was always a little frustrating to teach it. I enjoyed it because I enjoy the students, but I got frustrated with them too because they wouldn't read. I kept saying, "You can't learn to write if you don't read," and I was trying to bring them new stuff to read that they had not read before. Then, we would do short stories and the guys would all write about vampire women sucking their blood [laughter] and space trips and all kinds of things. There were a lot of vampires in what the guys wrote. The women wrote more about relationships. I mean, it was very clearly demarcated between like what the women did [and] what the men did. I'm like, "This is like very gender specific," and it was impossible to break that pattern.

Then, I got a job in the dean's office. The first semester, I was slated to teach an honors course and I got to design the course, so I got to teach for the Douglass Scholars Program, because all the honors programs had their own honors courses. So, this was a course on avant-garde women's writing, and so we did part poetry and part prose. I had them do both poetry writing and prose and writing about women--I got them a book with avant-garde women writers writing about their writing. So, I had them write about that, and then I had them do a lot of experimental writing on their own. We started the course looking at Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson. Those were the two writers that I sort of went back to and talked about a lot and then had them kind of design writing experiments. It was really fun. I had them design writing experiments and then trade with each other, but they had to do another person's experiment. So, it was a fun course to teach, and they also had to write a paper by the end.

Then, after that, I was like, "This job is way too much for me." It was transfer students, students on probation and seniors, which meant doing all the senior degree certifications. Then, with transfer students, it was credit evaluations and transfer registration days, which were these big programs where you had to bring in faculty and people to look at student's transcripts. It was just a lot of work. I stopped teaching in those years, and I think I got so lucky being able to teach the honors course. That was like a real pleasure, and some of those students I'm still in touch with, so it's nice.

I tended to stay away from the English Department as much as possible, because I felt like this sort of like ghost figure coming back. I felt very marginalized and peripheral. So, that's one reason I kind of stayed away. When they had a writer's series, I tended not to go to hear the writers, just because I didn't want to be around certain people, which was dumb, because when I went, I enjoyed it. I talked to people, I had a good time, but it was just out of my own kind of anxiety about having this very undefinable role. For grad students in the English Department who I'd run into, as well as faculty, working as an advisor at Douglass was like, "Who would do

that? Why would anyone do that?" Then, being a dean helped a little bit, but it was such a non-academic kind of role. Again, the University, there's a hierarchy here that you really feel when you work here. If you're not a tenure-track faculty member, you just feel like you're not a tenured-track faculty member. You're just something else that people don't always quite understand. [laughter] I've grown into that role--so now I'm totally comfortable--but it is difficult. For a long time, I really felt very marginalized by it. It took a lot of work to get to the point where I felt comfortable being in that position, so lot of therapy. [laughter] I think Highland Park is full of therapists who see people from Rutgers. [laughter] They all have these issues about being at Rutgers. No matter what role you're in at Rutgers, there's always something about it that's just uncomfortable. It took me a while to come to grips with that.

At the same time, I liked what I was doing. I mean, I liked the interaction with students. I didn't like the hierarchy of the University, the hierarchy of Douglass. I didn't feel like it was really a feminist organization. I still don't. But I was able to be comfortable in my space, and so my discomfort has really gone away. It's helpful to teach a course. It helps to teach. When you teach, you have a little cache, but then it's like, "Well, it's a required course at Douglass," and they get a lot of PTLs [part-time lecturers] teaching it. So, it's not much, but it's a little.

It's funny, because being a poet here never meant a lot to people. It kind of was like [makes a scoffing noise], like that. I remember going to Western Michigan to give a reading, and they put you up in this really fancy house. They take you out to dinner, and they treat you like royalty. It was amazing. Then, I came back here, and it was like none of that existed. When my book won an award, no one acknowledged it at Rutgers. It was weird. In fact, this year, they did ask me to read in the--there's a "Writer's from Rutgers" series that the English Department does, and so they did ask me to read this year in that series, maybe last year as well, and that's the first time. That's because I know one of the poets who's teaching here, and now she's in charge of that reading series. Before that, it was like being a poet here didn't really impress anyone. It was kind of my thing. [laughter]

I went through a lot of feeling uncomfortable and feeling marginalized and feeling angry about the way things were organized and not having a voice, which, for me, is really difficult because I am a writer. Having a voice is really important. That feeling, periodically, it still kind of plagues me, but I've separated my writing life from my work life, except for the way that I think about working with students. I think that's the continuity for me. In terms of actually working at Rutgers and then being a writer on the other end of that, those are like two really separate things.

The English Department has built up its writing program for undergraduates, which is nice, but when I was teaching creative writing, it really was not built up and they had no tenure track. They have one tenure track faculty member here who's running the program, but I don't think he's around very much, Mark [Doty]. He's a fairly well-known poet. The English Department was really excited about him, and I actually don't like his poetry, though almost everyone else seems to love him. People would be shocked to hear me say that. [laughter] The kind of people that the Rutgers English Department gets excited about are not the kind of people that I get excited about. Anyway, so, that's kind of an aside. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Mark Doty is an author of poetry and prose that works at Rutgers University as a Distinguished Professor and Director of the Writers House. He has worked at Rutgers since 2009.]

I would say working here has been sort of interesting and it's been a mixed bag, and yet I think I've been able to kind of clarify my own values and thinking, particularly about feminism and women issues. There are things I like and things I don't like about what we do here. There's a big emphasis on women's leadership, which I feel is so amorphous. It isn't always what I would think of as women's leadership, because I come from a background where art is not about leadership. I mean, expression and having a voice is, but art and writing, I always think back to Emily Dickinson and this sort of how does that enter into the life of a poet? It just doesn't really, but I understand it in a cognitive sense of like, "Oh, we need more women leaders." That's our job, to get more women to feel comfortable with that role. I get that, but it hasn't been something that I've personally been especially interested in. I haven't been ambitious in a way and taken on leadership roles. I'm more comfortable teaching about it and helping students kind of find their voice. I, myself, haven't taken on those kinds of roles. What was your original question?

KR: I asked you to trace your career at Rutgers.

RR: Okay.

KR: What was it like for you during undergraduate reorganization, when Douglass College became Douglass Residential?

RR: So, that was kind of interesting. I mean, at the time when that was going on, there was a year of struggle, and Douglass alumni and students were up in arms and angry. I was sort of like, "I don't know how this is going to work out. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm not sure how I feel about it. I do feel like the women's college is important." But I was also prepared for it being dissolved, which is what I thought was going to happen. Then, when it wasn't, I was really interested in and got very involved in talking with people about what it would become, like, what would advising become? So, my boss, who was the director of advising, was not interested in staying at Douglass. I was interested because I realized, "This could be a time to be really creative about what it is that I do."

I went behind the scenes and got Barry Qualls, who was a vice chancellor at the time and also had been very supportive of Douglass, to kind of force the dean, Dean Ambar at the time, to put together a faculty committee, because it seemed to me that we needed faculty to think about it. I was on that committee as a dean, and I wrote an initial kind of report that everybody had, when we came to the table and were talking about it, about what Douglass could look like. [I] had come up with this idea about having students follow through on academic pathways, where they would define their interests and then get involved in programs that were related to those interests, so that things would be more integrated, because I was thinking about integrative learning, which was a big thing at the time. So, we kind of based a proposal on that, and that meant we'd have to build up Douglass programs. [Editor's Note: Barry Qualls served as an English professor and administrator at Rutgers from 1971 to 2016. Qualls held the post of Vice President of Undergraduate Education and headed the Task Force on Undergraduate Education. Carmen Twillie Ambar served as the dean of Douglass College from 2002 to 2008.]

So, that report got kind of used and then rewritten by people. So, I had a lot to do with kind of thinking about what Douglass would be, and I got offered the position as the director of advising. I also was offered a position at SAS [School of Arts and Sciences] as director of their advising. So, both jobs were like the same grade, and I had to figure out what I wanted. I knew at SAS it would be like herding cattle, because there were just so many students. I thought, "At Douglass, it would be more creative, more manageable. It would be just kind of more satisfying." So, I took that position, and it was really difficult at first during the transformation. We didn't even know where we were getting out pencils. We were like, "I don't know how to do anything." Everything was in this sort of state of disarray, and things were being reorganized. We were all trying to come up with the answers to questions just kind of on the fly. So, that was a really interesting year.

So, I started working on what advising would look like. SAS didn't want us to do any academic advising, which was ridiculous, but they didn't want us to tell students the wrong thing. So, I was training staff to do advising, and eventually, after Carmen left and Jackie was here, we didn't even want to call it advising. So, we call it mentoring now. I still do a lot of academic advising, and I mean, there's no other way to really describe it, but we do talk more to students. The staff are not trained to do academic advising, because they don't know what the policies are and what the requirements are. So, they are able to have these conversations with students about who are they, what do they want to do. That's kind of the philosophy of mentoring, that it's really holistic, and if a student needs to know what requirements she needs--like, does she need to take algebra or not--she can go to her SAS advisor. So, we get students to come in for mentoring.

We have a required assignment in our first-year course, where they have to create a kind of action plan for themselves, like what their goals are and what steps they'll take to get them in both academic and in terms of campus engagement and in terms of career goals, which of course are going to change. At least we're getting them to think about the overarching picture and to think about [how] you can have a goal, but you need to also have a way to get there. So, we talked to students about that. So, it is just more holistic and kind of takes everything into account, including their background. I mean, I always talked to students about stuff like this, "Well, what does your family expect from you? What do you want to do?" and just kind of ask them questions that they can kind of reflect on what it is that they're talking about. So, it's a much better way of advising. It's much more satisfying.

What SAS does is it kind of gives each student a certain amount of time to figure out degree requirements, and then that's the kind of end of the conversation. If they get a good advisor, that's great, but some of the advisors there are just very like, "Okay, you have twenty minutes." So, I kind of feel like we're a corrective to that (I'll spent up to an hour with a student), and at the same time, I can't tell a student what her engineering requirements would be. So, it works out nicely, because I can then just send them to their faculty.

We had to invent all that--kind of slowly come to that--and I mean, I had to learn how to describe it. I still was kind of thinking about this sort of concept with integrative learning, where things that students did should have some connection to other things they did, so that they weren't just kind of taking more requirements for no reason except that the school told them to, and then doing a major where they couldn't see the connections between things. So, I worked on an e-

portfolio project, which was a grant project that I worked on for a while. We used it for a while, but it was--I had to go through IT--or Office of [Information] Technology, OIT--to put Sakai together to house this e-portfolio structure. There weren't enough people working on Sakai to really do a good job keeping up with what was going on with the program. So, there were all these kinks and glitches and things that were really difficult about it, so we kind of had to abandon that.

For a while, I was going to meetings with people from other schools, and it was always interesting to hear people talk because it was very pedagogical. It was very much about pedagogy, and to me that's always fascinating. The other thing I did there was I made it really clear that I was an advisor and that I was thinking about things as an advisor. Even though I did have a background in kind of reading about pedagogy and I had a background in teaching, I could talk about it, but I wanted it to be really clear, because I didn't want to feel silenced because I wasn't a faculty member. It was sort of my opportunity to say, "This is really important work" and make it important. I think that that whole experience helped me to kind of place that in the context where without this, it would mean that students aren't really thinking at all about what they're doing or why they're doing it.

Some students think about that naturally because they're really good students, and they just kind of know how to think about that. Other students are kind of less experienced and don't really think about a "through-line" within their college experience. So, they don't have a sense of continuity, and trying to build that up with them is part of what we do. We also do try to get them involved in leadership programs and in career development programs. That part is also important for them, and that's why it's a more holistic mentoring process. I still call it advising to myself, but we kind of call it mentoring so SAS won't get upset with us and that's worked out for us, I think.

That's where the transformation took us. Now, there's been a lot of reorganization. I mean, we are constantly reorganizing and changing structures here and certain programs are stronger, like our STEM program is much stronger than it was a while ago. So, things are just kind of happening, and I'm getting closer to feeling like, "Okay, I've been at Rutgers for a really long time. How much more can I really want to stay here?" [laughter] I mean, the answer is not much, but financially, I need to work, so that's where I am right now. I've been here long enough, I'm vested, so I have medical insurance benefits. If I leave, I'd have to pay for them, but I'm still too young to draw on a pension. So, I'm not quite there yet. So, I think I'll probably have to wait until I'm sixty-five, which I'm hoping I can do that successfully without sort of collapsing on the floor and having a temper tantrum of some kind, which I've come close to.

There are politics here that I've navigated in not the best way--I could've navigated them better--just because I don't like doing politics and being strategic. I noticed other people are much better at it than I am. When I give students advice, I'm like, "You need to really do some research about what you're getting into," stuff that I just never did, because I just kind of did the next thing. I tell them my story about my first job, which was horrible, and how I got it--which is a long story which I won't go into--and the mistakes that I made. I do use my own mistakes as a way of kind of telling them, "It's okay to make mistakes, but you don't have to make the mistakes because I already made them and you don't have to do them this way."

That was the TUE, and I think Douglass has been going pretty strong. We have 2,400 students. So, they thought we wouldn't get more than a like hundred our first year, and we got about four hundred. So, it kept going up every year. Now, it's kind of remained steady, and I think we're kind of at capacity.

KR: The faculty committee that you were on as a dean and you came up with this proposal, how much did that become a roadmap for what Douglass Residential has become?

RR: Initially, it was a roadmap, because we needed something to give to the president of the University, to give to McCormick. In terms of what Douglass has become, that's pretty much gone, because the programs have taken on a life of their own, and they've become much stronger. Because of the reorganization and because we were a residential college, none of us knew what that meant. No one knew how to define that, outside Douglass or even inside Douglass. So, the only way we could really kind of justify ourselves was to make the programs really strong, and so that's been happening. We've done that, I think, and the roadmap that I put together--I mean, I did it in conversation with other people, but I think I had initially come up with this idea of educational pathways and having students, depending on the student's area of interest, get involved in certain programs, because that was a way of selling our programs. [Editor's Note: Richard L. McCormick served as the president of Rutgers from 2002 to 2012.]

In a way, it's still informing what we do, because we're trying to get students to take advantage of our programs. So, we have the Global Village, which is a living-learning [community] based on culture and language, and a lot of those are really popular. We have the program in STEM, and the students in STEM will get involved in things that are around STEM, whatever program they're in. We've developed two learning communities on Busch, one for computer science and one for engineering. So, the programs have gotten stronger. I don't think anyone would know this, because nobody here now has ever even seen that report. Everybody's changed; all the personnel have changed. I think I'm the only person who's still here.

Yet, it sort of does inform the way we think about things, which is that we're trying to get students to engage in our campus programs, first of all, because they're strong and they won't get the opportunity anywhere else, also so that they get a chance to kind of experience this sort of connecting their interests to some kind of experiential program. So, that was kind of the goal, to get students to take advantage of the co-curricular and experiential programs in line with what they were studying, and sometimes they do that in a very obvious way. Sometimes they don't do it at all. Sometimes they do it a little bit, so it depends on the student. But it has meant that we've built programs up. I think we had to, at that point, and that initial report was kind of based on the fact that that would have to happen. I think it was implicit. So, it does and it doesn't have to do with what we're doing now. Again, no one ever saw that report except the people at that table. I mean, those were faculty. Some are still here, but it wasn't their baby. They were just trying to think about, "How do you put a proposal together that the president of the university is going to accept as this is something that, yes, a residential college can be structured around?" So, that was that was really about. It was one of those things like, "Well, that's what we said we were going to do, but now what are we really going to do?" Like, "No one's paying attention, so we could kind of do anything we wanted," and that's kind of still the case. No one's paying

attention, so we can do what we want, except the people who are here, and the students get very connected to the college.

They're very conscious of being Rutgers students now, which they were less so before, but they're also very proud of being at Douglass and happy to be at Douglass. They have to choose to be at Douglass too, which before the University just shuttled them into whatever profile they had when they came in. Higher profiles were Rutgers College, then Douglass, if there were women, and then Livingston. That was kind of like this unspoken connection and hierarchy between the colleges themselves, which made Livingston students feel like shit, I think, because they felt like they were at the bottom of the barrel. Douglass students, I think, felt, when they first entered, like they were second-class citizens and then they would get connected to the college and connected to each other, and they would slowly take on a lot of school spirit.

It's funny, because I've never had school spirit. [laughter] I was at Vassar, [and] I was like, "The faculty are pretty good here and I have some friends, but I'm not going to give money to this school. They're taking all the money." I get requests for donations. I'm like, "I don't have anything to give you. You have rich alumni. Get it from them." So, I don't have that kind of like school spirit because I feel like, in reality, you could go to one [place], it's what you make of it. School's what you make of it, and so that's kind of how I think. At the same time, I kind of have to go on with this putting the Douglass magnet on the back of my car. In fact, someone put it on there for me. It was like, "Oh God." [laughter] I like a lot of the alumni, and I like the students and stay in touch with them and they stay in touch with the college.

I do think it's important now to think about, "Okay, this is all part of a project of women's education," which is really important. It is important for women to have a room of their own, and that's still, I think, something that they get here. That's not something that we necessarily do, except by having this available to them.
They get that, and then they get that out of the first-year course too, because I think a lot of it is about finding your voice as a woman, figuring out what aspects of societal controls you're going to accept and what you're not. Are you going to accept what the media tells you you should be, or are you not going to accept that? Are you going to accept the way that gender is demarcated, and is that going to work for you? We accept students who are women identified. So, we have trans students and students who identify as women and non-binary students. All of that has made it a more interesting place and more challenging in terms of thinking about gender and what that's going to mean to different students. I do see Douglass as being a part of an important project, but I'm still not into school spirit. [laughter]

KR: Is it okay if we take a quick break?

RR: Yes, sure.

KR: Okay.

[TAPE PASUED]

KR: Okay, so we are talking about the Mabel Smith Douglass Honors Program. [Editor's Note: Mabel Smith Douglass (1874-1933) served as the first dean of the New Jersey College for Women from 1918 to 1932. In her honor, the college was renamed Douglass College in 1955.]

RR: Right. First of all, I worked with a lot of students in the Douglass Scholars Program to figure out what their thesis would be about and who an advisor would be and what advisor they could find who would help them, because they needed a faculty supervisor. They needed two readers, a first and second reader, so I would help them with that. I would help them to find the projects, sometimes--not all the time--and sometimes, they just did it through their department and a faculty member. I got to talk to them along the way about the whole process of writing a thesis. At the beginning of it, the faculty committee would decide how much money they would get. We would all talk about what our reservations were about some of the projects. They would hand in a proposal and we would kind of critique it and say, "Well, this is way too broad" or too narrow--but usually too broad--and say, "This'll work if the student can kind of chisel it down to a more manageable project." That process was fun.

Then, at the end of the year, they would have a day when they would talk about their thesis. They'd invite their parents and faculty who helped them, their supervisors, and then we would have a dinner. So, it was always a nice program. It was also another time when we had a faculty committee, and it was always fun to have a voice on the faculty committee. I seldom got to do that.

KR: You have been involved with some of the institutional support here at Rutgers with LGBTQ+ communities. Can you talk about how you first got involved in that?

RR: Well, so, I met Cheryl Clarke, who was running the first community support program, [the] Office of Social Justice, and it was called something else before that. [Editor's Note: Cheryl Clarke is a poet, educator, and administrator who spent forty-one years at Rutgers until her retirement in 2013. In 1992, she became the founding director of the Office of Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian/Gay Concerns at Rutgers, which became the Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities.]

KR: Office of Diverse Community Affairs …

RR: Yes.

KR: … And LGBT Concerns.

RR: She was partnered with Barbara Balliet, who was the associate director of the Women's Studies Department, and Barbara worked down the hall from me. So, I knew Barbara, and then when she and Cheryl got together, Cheryl would come down. I also had gotten Cheryl to do a poetry reading, because I had this women poet series. So, I knew Cheryl, and I was on a task force when it was the Office of Diverse Community Affairs. We would meet periodically, just to kind of talk about what issues students were having. Then, it became the Office of Social Justice Education, and then it was taken over by--Cheryl became a Dean of Students [for Livingston Campus] for a while, before she retired, so Zaneta Rago--it wasn't Zaneta at first, it was

somebody else, and then Zaneta took over. [Editor's Note: Barbara Balliet served as the associate dean of Douglass Residential College and is a Professor Emerita of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers. Zaneta Rago-Craft served as the director of the Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities at Rutgers. In 2019, she became the inaugural Director of the Intercultural Center at Monmouth University.]

So, I sign on as one of the LGBTQ liaisons and would go through a training every year and have a sign in my office. It was meant to make students who were LGBT feel comfortable talking to you. So, some students took advantage of that, usually when there was a crisis, like their parents were kicking them out of the house because they came out. Yes, I remember one student who came; her parents wouldn't go to see her graduate. Just really sad kind of moments. I would go to the Rainbow Graduation every year, and then at Douglass I helped--Douglass used to have a student group for lesbian and bisexual women, and then, after the transformation of undergraduate education, that group kind of disappeared. So, it seemed really important to me that Douglass would have a group for women, because there were groups for gay and lesbian students, but there wasn't a group for women and women-identified folks.

So, I got together with a group of students, and we put together a group called the Douglass Q/mmunity, and then, after a couple years, I said, "Look …" Well, during the first year I told them, "You need to write a constitution and become a Rutgers student organization." So, once they did that, they kind of moved over to the Office of Social Justice Education, so I didn't feel like I had to be responsible for that anymore. Now, they're kind of self-sufficient, but I'm happy to see that they exist, just so that there is a group for women. Then, this year--or last year--they're having a meeting and they were saying, "Some people think it's only for Douglass students." I said, "Well, why don't you change the name?" and they thought that was a good idea. That was at a meeting we were having with some leadership groups that were sort of affiliated with Douglass, but then they didn't change the name. So, I don't know what they're doing now. [laughter] So, I was involved with that.

Then, we had a committee here on diversity and inclusion. One of the first questions that came up was, "Are you going to accept transgender students?" and we felt like, "Yes." Then, the question was how and who and when. So, we looked at other women's colleges and looked at their policies, and Mills College had a good policy. It seemed to make the most sense where they admitted women-identified students, whether they had transitioned or not; they didn't ask. That was our policy, and then someone said, "Well, but what if they're transitioning to male," and we're like, "Well, we'll admit them if they define themselves as women or women identified, but if they're here and they're transitioning to male, then we're not going to kick them out, so they're here." The thinking is that any kind of group that's marginalized on the basis of gender is certainly welcome--should be at a women's college--because that's what it's kind of about. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Mills College is a private college in Oakland, California.]

So, I think it's been a little tricky to get that language on our website, because I think the people have been a little afraid of the alumni reaction. So, it's in our recruitment and admissions policy and we do have students here who are transgender or transitioning, but we don't have any written policy on our website, which I think is a problem. I think that there should be one, but unfortunately, Douglass has always had this issue with defining itself as a feminist institution,

and it's so annoying. It's like, "Just do it." Yes, maybe you're going to lose a few people who don't think of themselves as feminists, but you're also going to gain people who do think of themselves that way. So, it's always been this issue, and we're still not over it. I'm like, "Just get over it." That's gone on for a while, and the same thing, I think, is true with the trans population. Douglass doesn't want to make any alumni worried that we're accepting "men."

So, there's been--one of the members of that organization--when we were meeting that committee--wrote up a good kind of synopsis for the website, but they never put it up on the website. I think I'm the only one who's still here from that committee. There's a lot of turnover here because of politics and the way that power is getting played out. So, I have all of that documentation, but we haven't revisited it. Now there's a separate diversity inclusion committee which I'm not on, which is not addressing those kinds of issues. It's too bad.

My feeling was that Douglass should be a place where people with non-binary gender identities, who are transgender or who are gender fluid or who are transitioning to male, should all be able to be a part of this institution. We talk about women and marginalization, but then we have to recognize the other groups that are marginalized. So, we tend to talk about diversity in terms of race and nationality but not in terms of gender. We're very diverse in terms of race. We have a number of trans students, but they're kind of under the radar. I've been working with one who's coming in in the fall as a non-traditional student, because I run a program for non-traditional women students, which I also love to do. That's a fun program to run, because they're grown-ups, and I end up kind of making friends with some of them because they're my age, mostly after they graduate. [laughter]

KR: How big is that program in terms of student population?

RR: So, I think there are about 170 students in that program. This year, we haven't gotten as many. I think our enrollment figures might be a tiny bit down this year. So, there are about twenty-five incoming, at this point. I've been doing the new student orientation programs for non-traditional students. They have a session on it, and I've been going and trying to convert some of the women to Douglass and I think a few of them have joined. So, I try to do a peer mentoring program, where we match some students up, current students with incoming students--I'm trying to get that together now--just really for the beginning of the year, so that the incoming students can ask questions, because those students are very anxious about starting Rutgers. They end up being the best students--they're really good students--but they are the most nervous of the students when they start. A lot of them, they went to a county college and then they transferred here, but a lot of them either were in school earlier and had bad experiences and never went back, or their families really didn't believe in educating them, so they never pushed college on them. Then, they find out that they really want to learn and they love learning, and so that's this great thing. They're just really loving being in school. I mean, they struggle but they love it, and a lot of them are just our best students.

KR: This question has to do with the IRW. It is asking for a reflection on your part. You have done a number of different administrative jobs at Douglass and Rutgers University over the years and then worked at the IRW for a period of time. I was wondering if you could reflect on, from where you are now, the IRW and its programming and the meaning of it.

RR: Well, when I was at IRW--and I was in the English Department--I was so conflicted about what I wanted to do with my life and so confused. I felt very welcomed by IRW; that was a really nice feeling. At the same time, I think so much confusion was happening in my life, especially with coming out, wanting to be a poet and being in an academic program, and knowing I needed to transfer, which I didn't fully figure out until my second year. Then, I kind of spent that year applying to schools, or my third year, I spent applying to schools. I had just a lot of things that I was really preoccupied with. So, part of me was just kind of grateful to do the administrative work. I was tangentially interested in what was happening there and in the lecture series and in the projects they were doing. A lot of me was just also not there, you know, was just kind of trying to figure out my own life.

It was a nice place to be. It was very welcoming. I was very quiet then. I didn't talk a lot to people, because I was kind of insecure and unsure of myself. There are just so many things I was unsure about, and, well, I did feel comfortable with the people at IRW. When we would have these little parties with women's studies staff and if there were birthday parties or whatever, I remember feeling like, "I can't talk here. I don't know what to say," and feeling like very pent up. So, a part of me felt like I was welcomed and then a part of me felt like, "I don't know how to be here," and I think that a lot of that was just out of all this stuff that I was going through. So, at the time, the kind of going back to just doing administrative work and typing things for people and doing that kind of stuff was like fine for the summer.

Whenever I had those kinds of jobs, I would get interested in what I was working on, whatever the place. At the World Bank, I got interested in how they made bricks in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. [laughter] In terms of feeling like it was having an influence on me, I think it did, but I also think that it took a really long time for that influence to actually be felt. It was later when I got to be closer to Ferris, after house sitting for her and also she and I devised a Women and Creativity learning community, and that's still going strong. That's still one of our learning communities. We figured out what that would be about, and we brought together, again, a committee around that to talk about it. At that point, it was funny, because she was no longer at IRW, but that's when I sort of felt the IRW influence more.

Then, it was interesting going back there and doing a seminar with them a few years later--many years later. They kind of have the same staff configuration, but they're so much more established now. I remember that when I came back here, another person--a woman in the English Department that I knew--was working there in the summers, and she hated it and I don't know why. I mean, I think she didn't get along with Ferris or it was something going on there. So, that was just kind of interesting to me, because I felt like it was a very warm and welcoming kind of place to be. So, I'm always pushing students to do their learning community--they have a one-credit learning community there--and I like Sarah [Tobias, associate director of the IRW] a lot. The current director, I don't really know--Arlene Stein. Of course, Sarah didn't know I had worked there in the summers, but it was so long ago and it was such a different place.

I was just so different then, because I had to figure out who I was, what my sexual orientation was, what my kind of critical groundwork was, and where I fit into everything. At the time, I was feeling like I didn't fit into Rutgers. I really felt like a square peg in a round hole at Rutgers.

I just never felt like I really fit. When I was at IRW, it was a good respite from the English Department, but it was also at a time when I was feeling like a misfit at the university. It was probably a better experience being there than I ever felt being in the English Department, which should've told me something about being in [an] institution that was devoted to thinking about women and women's expression and women's work in all different kinds of ways. I think that's my reflection back on it, that I took something from it but never knew, at the time, that I was taking anything from it until later. I did appreciate the way that they function as a kind of non-hierarchical institution, which I saw as being, "This is how a feminist organization should function." That was actually very different than Douglass.

I mean, I think Douglass may have tried to be that way, but it just wasn't because it's so much under Rutgers thumb that it functions like Rutgers. Rutgers is, by and large, not a feminist institution, despite the fact that it has such a strong history of having women's and gender studies here. The administrative feeling of Rutgers is not feminist, at least not to me where I sit, and I'm not close to the top. [laughter] Where I am and what I see, it just doesn't feel that way. It might be if they got a female president after Barchi leaves, which it's about time that they did. They've never had one. [Editor's Note: Robert Barchi served as the president of Rutgers from 2012 to 2020.]

KR: That is what I have been thinking also.

RR: Yes. [laughter] So, that's what they really need. First of all, it would bring us into the 21st century, which we're still like not. I mean, to never have had a woman president at the university is kind of shocking, but I guess it's not when you look at universities across the country. The leadership is still not, by and large, women. They're in the kind of sub-leadership positions but not in top leadership positions. That's true of any organization, or a lot. So, that's something that I think about, that I notice, and kind of miss, because it's not something that I feel here a lot. I mean, in this building, I feel it, but in terms of the organization, as a whole, I feel we're just so controlled by Rutgers that we kind of take on the structures of Rutgers.

The other thing about working at IRW is that I don't remember my other friends working during the summers. That's one thing that I think, like, "What do they do in the summer? How do people earn money?" How did my friends in the program, who had teaching assistantships, like I did, where you weren't really teaching in the summer, how did they earn money? I know some people had some part-time jobs, like working in the English Department, but I don't remember people taking on any kind of secretarial work or doing any kind of labor like that. So, at the time, I think I was like one of the only people. I will say I had a strong group of friends when I was here. So, I had people that I stayed in touch with and have been in touch with. There were things about being here at Rutgers that I really value, but I always did feel very much like a misfit, like this is not my place. So, yes, that's kind of all I can come up with in terms of the connection.

KR: Well, I have reached the end of my questions.

RR: Okay.

KR: At this point, would you like to add anything?

RR: I feel like I've added so much and too much in some places, so, no, I'm good. [laughter] I'm talked out.

KR: Okay.

RR: I'm kind of talked out for now. I think I've said pretty much what I can say. [laughter] I wish I had more to give with thinking about IRW and how that functioned in my life, but it was at a very funny time in my life. So, I was grateful for it and also kind of partly trying to figure out all these other things that weren't about that. That was my experience being here as a grad student, anyway. [laughter]

KR: Well, thank you so much for doing these oral history interviews.

RR: Thank you so much for letting me talk. [laughter]

KR: Okay, I am going to stop.

RR: Okay.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

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