

RUDINE SIMS BISHOP  
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
AT THE OSU ARCHIVES  
AUGUST 16, 2013

Q. I am Evelyn Freeman. Today is August 16, 2013, and I am interviewing Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, whose birthday is July 31, 1937. Hi Rudine.

A. Hi.

Q. Could you talk a little about the positions that you held or the roles that you have played at Ohio State – in what units and over what time period?

A. I came to Ohio State in 1986 from the University of Massachusetts, having taught for a number of years prior to that. And I was hired in the College of Education as, certainly not as a replacement, but in the position that had been held by [Education Professor] Charlotte Huck. I came in as a full professor. And that was the main role that I played throughout my time at Ohio State. I was also, along with [Education Associate Professor] Janet Hickman, co-director of the annual Ohio State University Children's Literature Conference, and at some point I was section head for the group within [the School of] Teaching and Learning that was called Language, Literature and Reading (LLR).

Q. Thank you. Can you talk a little bit about, well back on the roles, I know that you also were involved in the University in terms of committees. We could also talk about that later as well. That might come up later.

A. Not as many as some people seem to think, and I think the thing I left out in the previous question was the duration of my tenure here. I retired in 2002. As far as University committees, I think the most recent one was looking at the potential

role of retirees in the University as well as looking at those people who have been Associate Professors for many years and have not been promoted. And we were looking at possible ways to support them in their efforts at promotion. Other than that, I think most of my University-wide, committee work really just had to do with doctoral student committees. I was at some point on a committee that was advisory to the Wexner Center. But other than that, I'm not remembering a lot of University committee work.

Q. Can you also then talk about your own family background and experiences you feel shaped you prior to coming to OSU?

A. I was born in a small town in Pennsylvania; it sounds like the story of being born in the log cabin in the woods. As Virginia Hamilton would say, it was on the outer edge of the Great Depression. We had very little money, and my parents had not had much opportunity for education. And so education was highly valued in the family. And so the thing was, you go to school and do well in school. And I took that to heart. So I was a good student for the most part. It was a small town. The African-American population was quite small; everybody knew everybody. When I graduated from high school – this will give you a sense of the numbers – there were six African-American students out of 185, and that was a large class of African Americans. Usually there were one or two. And I say this to sort of talk about shaping. As I said, I was a good student and one of two African-American girls at the head of the class in high school. And so that meant that I got some kind of support. We had no money. In order to go to school, I had to have jobs and scholarships and that sort of thing. And so all of that doing well in school

kind of paid off in that regard. I attended a State Teachers College, again partly because of money and partly because of support, and partly because I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. I think part of the experience of family and background and community shaping who I became was that, in that community there were no African-American teachers, except for one. My godmother taught the nursery school. So everybody in the community went through Mrs. Foster. But once you got into the public schools there were none. There was one woman, one African American who had been a teacher before she moved to my town, and she was really inspirational. And because I did well in school and teachers liked me, I guess, and because my parents had placed such a high value on education, I knew from the time I was in maybe fourth grade that what I wanted to be was a teacher. I think the other side of that coin is that I didn't know of many other things I could be. A nurse was one possibility. Secretary was a possibility. But given that time and place, I wanted to be a teacher and that sent me off to West Chester State Teachers College, where I had a really good experience. And again, I did well in terms of grades and academics and was fairly active in some extra-curricular activities. And I don't know how far you want me to go with this whole trajectory here. I started teaching in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in third grade, then fifth grade. I moved from there to being a language arts supervisor in Upper Bucks County. This was sort of Oscar Hammerstein country; I understand he had lived there, as had Pearl Buck at one time. One hundred square miles of territory and about five elementary schools. So I drove around to the schools. I think there about three Black people in the whole territory. So I began to feel pretty socially

isolated after a while and I looked to different horizons. I wrote to some African-American historically Black colleges and said, “I’ve got this Master’s degree and could I come and teach?” I think some of them said, “We don’t think so.” But Morgan State [University], in Baltimore, said, “Yes, sure, come on and teach curriculum development or whatever.” And I taught a little bit of children’s literature there as well. That was a good experience. After I had been at Morgan for two years, I went to a conference in Houston. It was the time when ESEA [the Elementary And Secondary Education Act of 1965] and Title I [equal opportunity to education for children], and all that was prominent and people were writing proposals for federal funds. I think there had not been as much success as they had hoped with some of the historically Black colleges. So there was this workshop/conference that was set up to help people in HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] be more successful with those proposals. And the head of my department asked me if I wanted to go and I said, “Oh sure.” But when I got there I met Ken Goodman and Roger Shy.

Q. I didn’t know that’s how you met them. Oh my gosh.

A. I had realized by that time that if I wanted to stay in college teaching – and I had decided I liked it – I needed a doctorate degree. So I guess I made that known as talked to people at the meeting, and Ken invited me to apply to Wayne State University to their program. They had a program called an Instructor Internship. They brought in people who had at least five years pre-college teaching and interviewed us and made us take the GRE, and hired us as instructors on a year-to-year basis, but we were also doctoral students. And that was a terrific

experience. I met some really good friends there. And it was from there, of course, that the trajectory took off. I spent a year at Buffalo and then on to U-Mass, Amherst [University of Massachusetts at Amherst]. I had been hired as the Director of the Reading Program. So I taught reading instruction and children's literature as a part of that. And after a while my preference became children's literature. And then Charlotte Huck decided to retire, and Ohio State offered me an opportunity to focus on children's lit. So here I am.

Q. I'm very glad.

A. Yes, me too.

Q. In what ways do you generally identify yourself, both in terms of how you see yourself as well as how others see you, in terms of gender, race, religion, etc. How has being a female shaped you as you female you feel, and then how do you feel like your other identities have shaped your life?

A. I think given the time that I grew up, I tend to identify myself perhaps equally as Black and female. But I think the Black or African American tends to come first. In terms of religion, I'm Protestant, African Methodist Episcopal, have been all my life. And my social class has changed. I grew up certainly in what would have been the lower socioeconomic group, as in no money, and now we're comfortable. I think people would say middle class. How has being a female shaped my life? It's really hard to say. I came of age when the issue of the day was not sexism or feminism. I don't mean that it didn't exist or that people weren't concerned about it, but the issue of my day was race and racial discrimination and equality and all of that. I graduated from high school about the

time Rosa Parks was starting that boycott. My female-ness was shaped in a fairly traditional way. The expectation was that you finish school, you went to college, you got married. I remember talking about having children and staying home until they went to school, and then going back to teaching, none of which happened. As I said, I think my primary identity really is as an African American, and how has that shaped my life? Well, I don't know. It's hard to articulate. Being Black in America is what it is. It's challenging. It's challenging. But it has changed certainly. It's a lot better now than it was way back when, when I graduated from high school. There's a story there.

When I graduated, another African-American girl and I were at the top of the class and we both needed money to go to college, and we both wanted to go to college. And so we went downtown to one of the local five-and-ten stores where my father had worked for a long time, to see if we could get a summer job. We knew that other girls had done that, got summer jobs as a sales clerks. And there had been in the paper an editorial about how my city, Pottsville, shared the pride of these two young Black (actually "colored") women who had graduated and so on. And so we just knew that this would be a piece of cake. But we were told that the town just was not ready to hire Black girls behind the counter. So we've come a long way. We've come a long way. There are other kinds of things. When we went to West Chester, there were five of us young Black girls who shared a room in the dorm. That was fine and I made some lifelong friendships there. But we came to understand that it hadn't been too many years since we would not have been allowed to live on campus. So things have changed.

Q. So thinking about those identities here at Ohio State, do you feel like being a woman shaped any of your experiences here at OSU, and if so, how and if not, do you have any thoughts on why you don't think being a woman did that?

A. I think that in our field, in elementary education, in literacy, in teaching, I think that women dominate, I don't know if dominate is the word, but there certainly are more of us than men. And therefore, I don't think I felt that being a woman really either held me back or pushed me forward within the College. I didn't want administrative positions. So I didn't have any experience with trying to advance in that regard and being denied or felt that I was being denied. I came with tenure and rank, and so I didn't have to go through that process. So no, I really felt pretty comfortable, I have to say, in regards to being a woman in the College of Education and in the School of Teaching and Learning.

Q. How about your other identities? Being African American here at Ohio State?

A. Again, I certainly was aware of it but I can't say that I felt any personal kinds of issues or challenges that came my way because of being a Black woman. I'm aware that that probably is not the case for everybody. Maybe I'll just stop there. Personally, I think I was fortunate and it may have been just my time of life and circumstances.

Q. When you were in the College, can you talk a little bit about the other women in your unit in terms of their positions and their identities regarding race or class, and what you thought the climate in your unit and in the University might be like for them?

A. Are we saying unit as in college or do you think Teaching and Learning?

Q. I think either. I think if you could talk about different levels, especially if you perceived differences in the climate within, let's say, your department versus the College versus the University as a whole, if you had any perspectives on that.

A. I don't know. There aren't that many of us Black women, certainly within the Teaching and Learning. A few more, of course, in the College. In terms of the University, I can remember that when I came, as I said, I came as a full professor, which made me the second African American female full professor in campus.

Q. You mean in the whole University?

A. Yes.

Q. That I didn't know.

A. [Associate Provost] Anne Pruitt was already there, and neither of us had earned our tenure at Ohio State University. So there was that. I think the first Black woman that I know about who earned tenure and full professor here was Gwen Cartledge.

Q. Oh my, that late?

A. That late. Now it may be that historically way back when, some African-American woman did become a tenured full professor here. But in my time, I know I was the second one at the time. There were just the two of us.

Q. And that was in 1986?

A. 1986. Like I said, I may not have all of the history from back in the day. I mean, that says that there was an impasse somehow at the University level or across the University.



Q. While you were here at OSU did you have any concerns in your unit or in the University about equity issues? I assume they mean here women's equity, but I don't know for sure.

A. Yes, and again, it's hard for me to know. I think within the College my impression was, and maybe other women might have a whole different impression, but my impression was that the climate was pretty good. There were women who were section heads, who were heads of the schools or departments. We had a female dean. I don't know about salaries, which may have been one of the equity issues. So I'm not sure that I was even aware of what some of those issues might have been, particularly as it relates to being women.

Q. Can you talk about the most powerful experience you had at Ohio State? I wasn't quite sure what they meant by this, but I'm not quite sure what this question means.

A. I'm not sure either but we'll see what we can come up with. I knew that that was going to be a question and I tried to think about it. I think that it was for me the opportunity to be a part of one of the premier children's literature programs in the country in terms of children's literature in education. That meant that we had influence, certainly in Central Ohio, and nationwide, I think. We were able with that annual conference to bring in writers and artists who were premier in the country and beyond. We brought Mem Fox from Australia and Margaret Mahy from New Zealand and Aidan Chambers from England, and so on. And to be able to be a part of that was, I think, a powerful experience in many ways.

Q. Did you personally work to effect any institutional change around equity issues, and if so, can you talk about those experiences?

A. Well, the Black faculty, minority faculty in the College, did try to make a difference in terms of the numbers of students from diverse groups who were admitted and the kind of support that they would get while they were here. And I think about hiring faculty and dean. I was a part of that. I didn't take a particular leadership role but I was a part of that. And I think it was partly keeping in touch, meeting with the deans from time to time, and just making an effort when faculty were coming up for tenure, to try to see that they had whatever kind of support they needed to build their portfolio, that kind of thing. I don't recall that I did anything along those lines related to gender issues and gender equity.

Q. Were there any collective efforts around equity change or change for diversity that you either participated in or observed over the time you were at OSU?

A. I think that the business I was just talking about, that's about it. I can't think of other collective efforts, I'm sorry.

Q. That's okay. Do you think that the climate for African-American faculty changed over time?

A. It's hard to tell, I think so. I would like to think it changed for the better but it's hard to know. I couldn't tell you any stories or give you any examples of what, other than there are a lot more Black female full professors here now than there used to be. But I don't know, if you look at the College, I don't know about numbers, for instance, or people who have to advance and have not been able to

do so. I see young people doing well in terms of their own careers. So that's a good thing.

Q. In terms of either when you left the University or at this point in time, from your perspective what remains undone relative to the progress of women and other diverse groups?

A. Well, it might be interesting to see another woman in the position that is currently open in Bricker Hall. I think that with the student body, that we still need some, a greater push for greater diversity among the undergrads and among doctoral students. I can't tell much about what is happening with faculty in that regard but I think that's one thing.

Q. Are there any other thoughts, topics, whatever that you want to talk about that we didn't talk about?

A. I don't think so.

Q. You feel like we've covered everything you wanted to share?

A. I think we did. I was sort of focused on what I thought would be the things I'd be asked about and didn't try to come with anything new.

Q. Do you have any memorabilia like photos, newspaper clippings, correspondence that you think, or you would be willing to permit Archives to photocopy, so they would be permanently available?

A. I can't think of anything of that nature that I have that would belong in these Archives really.

Q. I did have another question that relates to something earlier. I know that you served multiple times on the Personnel Committee of the School. In that position,

did you sense any issues, either for women faculty members or for African Americans or other minority faculty in terms of the promotion-and-tenure process? In other words, I guess did you feel that everyone was treated fairly and that gender or diversity issues were not a factor in that process?

A. In all honesty I think it's very hard to remove those issues from the process. They may not be overt and they may not even be conscious but I think it's hard to remove them. So I think there were a couple of instances where I had the sense that maybe a white male would have fared better in that process. And I can't even get specific. Well I wouldn't in terms of giving any information about any individual. But I think it's there. I think it's a part of who we are as a culture.

Q. Are there other women you think that the project should interview or who would be good to be interviewed for this project?

A. Well, certainly Anne Pruitt Logan at this point. Jackie Royster. I don't know that I can think of women who were here sometime ago before I arrived but I suspect those are the folks that we should try to go after, and I just don't know them well enough.

Q. Just as an aside, someone said the other day about Althea Bozeman. Was she retired by the time you came?

A. I think so.

Q. She was the first African-American woman to get tenure at Ohio State. I don't think she was ever promoted to full professor. I had her in class, actually. She taught at the University School and then became, as many of them did, professors. But yes, I didn't realize that. And I couldn't remember if she had already retired.

- A. I think she might have, but at least I don't remember the name.
- Q. Then I'm supposed to ask you if you are willing to interview one or two people for this project?
- A. I thought about that. I might be willing to interview someone.
- Q. Anything else you want to share or talk about in terms of your experiences here at OSU, both in the College and University wide?
- A. I don't think so. I really don't. I think we've covered what seems to me to be the important parts of this in relation to the women's history.
- Q. I did have one other question. As an African-American woman, did you ever feel pressure here to do certain kinds of things, like to be on a committee if there was no other African American or other woman on the committee, or that you felt like maybe you were called upon to do certain things because of your race and gender?
- A. That's another side of the coin. I think there may have been times when, and it may be that I'm running it together in terms of here and U-Mass, but certainly that's a phenomenon that occurs. When there are not very many representatives of diverse groups, and the institution decides that diversity is a priority or a goal, that they don't want to have all-white committees or all-male committees, then those who represent the diverse groups get asked to serve. And sometimes it's token but sometimes it really is a sincere effort to introduce diversity, and people don't tend to think about how many committees one person can represent diversity on. So yes, I experienced some of that.

Q. I think that might be it. Do you have anything else? I can't think of any other questions at this point.

A. I don't know. I mean, I guess I would ask you if you wanted me to go back over anything that you think could be expanded upon.

Q. I was really surprised to learn that when you came as a full professor, you were only one of two women African-American full professors. I think that's really astounding to me at a University our size in the 1980s. That that was the case.

A. And it was women because there were men. I can't think right now, probably Nick Nelson and some other males. But of the women, it was Anne and me.

Q. Quite astounding to me, it really is.

A. Well, I was surprised as well. And the fact that nobody on campus at the time, no Black female on the campus at the time had earned tenure here, was particularly startling. Anne and I both, as I said, came in with tenure. So times have changed.

Q. Yes, they have. Very interesting. I don't think there's anything else. We're concise. Okay, well we took about 45 minutes. I guess it's 36 minutes and 53 seconds. Okay, so about thirty-seven minutes. I think we're all set. I want to thank Rudine for participating in this project, and we'll sign off.

A. Okay, thank you.