

**WOMEN AT THE CENTER:
HISTORY OF WOMEN'S STUDIES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE**

TAPE LOG

Akasha hull is a writer, critic, lecturer and professor who has published widely in African American Literature and women's studies. She helped organize women's studies at UD in its early years and served as Director.

Name of person(s) interviewed: Akasha Hull (formerly Gloria T Hull)

Other people present: No one else present

Interviewer: Marie Laberge

Date of interview: Nov. 3, 2012

Location of interview: Office of Marie Laberge, 34 West Delaware Ave in Women and Gender Studies building

Special conditions (noise, interruptions, etc.): Some background truck noise, some train background noise

General description of contents: Akasha Hull talks about her background, her early education and entering into university, studying English. Discussion of her dissertation, entering academic life and her naiveté about it. Exploration of African American literature and classes. Working with other faculty at UD. Difficulties with promotions, meeting with other Black women writers and expanding her research into Black women's writing. Discussion of being token in many areas. Early issues in WOMS. Bringing activists to campus. Significant contributions of Women's Studies. Move to spiritual topics and fictional writing.

Recording Format and disc number: Video interview

Total Running Time: Disc 1 53:01; Disc 2 50:17

Page 1 of 5

TOPIC SUMMARY

Counter No. Contents

00:00 Background. Born and raised in Shreveport LA. Bachelors at Southern University. Got a fellowship at University of Illinois at Urbana but had just been married so dropped fellowship and went to Purdue University on assistantship where her husband was getting PHD in chemistry. Studied English at Purdue in late 60s – early 70s. Dissertation on women in Byron's poetry; was gravitating toward something meaningful to herself. Byron was an outsider and topic was on women in his poetry, using the dark and the light heroine. Retrospectively can see was searching for meaning and relevance. It wasn't really radical at the time, was just a decent topic.

4:10 -5:17 Around that time, 1970 began reading things like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Son born 1968. Even though Friedan was talking about white women, it resonated with Hull. Had to start thinking about being a professional academic woman and how that would fit with traditional role expectations.

TAPE LOG CONTINUED

Page 2 of 5

Counter No. Contents

5:17 Ended up in Delaware because husband got a job at DuPont. Came in 1970 with 2 year old kid and ABD. Looking for job, recalls interview at UD Charles Boehner, chair of English (not women's studies) and did interview. Recalls sitting with husband and son waiting to be called into the interview. Cameo image of the three of them, "showing how naïve I was. I had no sense you didn't show up for interview like that." I was inexperienced and unsophisticated and had no sense that I was a prized commodity.

9:00 Lack of sophistication is probably why things could happen here. Asked what would like to teach. When I began to start reading African American literature I was free to do that. The openness and possibility coincided perfectly with what was happening in society. Had been reading black revolutionary literature. No courses taught about it at the time. Self taught in the literature and black women poets. First article published on Black women poets.

12:00 Was able to develop self. Did not get opposition to it. Asked for new course in Black American literature, later a two semester course. At same time beginning the lecture series in WOMS, so could talk about Black women. It was not problematic but also not encouraged.

14:18 Opposition came when up for tenure review. Published article in Black journal from Black English Association and it was not considered legitimate journal. Had to prove legitimacy for the field and publications.

15:30 Promotions in English Department. Able to get the "smarts" to argue for self as more women organizing for themselves among the cadre of women who created women's studies. Other women, doing similar things here; wanting to talk about gender and sex roles, images of women in traditional fields, and that was useful.

17:15 Another important point was that my sisters who radicalized me were not in traditional academy. Went to MLA Dec. 1974. Ran into Barbara Smith, "There were so few of us." Search for others, connected with her. Joined the Combahee River Collective, began other activist work. Was a grounding to stand up in own defense. Helped develop sense of importance of my work.

20:30 My heaviest involvement in WOMS was in the early period. I was the "only one here". The first lecture series of Women's Studies I, in 1972 I did a lecture. The next year, Jeannette Sam, Asian woman and I did a lecture on Third World Women. Later Mary Ruth Warner was around. My cohorts were the movement activist Black women and the other academic black women who were also isolated as the "one". We sought each other out.

23:30 Does not recall getting pulled into involvement of the first class. I would not be one to be pulled into anything. I was often on board first. I was associating with Barbara Gates in English. We found each other. I also connected with women who were not faculty... staff who were a big part of the support base in doing stuff here. e. jean lanyon, worked in Hullihen. Janet Louise. Women like Janice Jordan in Black Studies. Was a sensibility that they needed to be inclusive.

TAPE LOG CONTINUED

Page 3 of 5

Counter No. Contents

27:50 At that point I was not resentful about being a token. In very early period, we really could just be women. Had not begun to make those distinctions that both refined but also fragmented efforts and movements and disciplines. Later had more sense we needed to talk about this.

29:20 Faculty enthusiasm was palpable in first class. I remember a lot of good energy, galvanization. We were educating our selves as well. Was kind of liberation. It was shared. Was able to bring people to University, brought Alice Walker. She was just getting started. Hull had been working with Feminist Press Reprints advisory committee, and published Zora Neale Hurston which Walker had edited. Recollection of Walker visit.

33:30 Also bought Sonia Sanchez, brought a radical Black Power perspective very fiery and radical. Talking about killing whitey, women strung out on dope. People walked out. Was a way to bring radical realness to a more conservative campus. We did bring in many people.

36:48 No resistance by English about involvement in WOMS, nothing that registered. Except in evaluations. Did a lot of talks and mentoring and there was a sense that women needed to be on committees and I was a black and a woman. When I came up for evaluation, associate chair said "you're very rich in service," meaning disproportionately so. I said in essence well then you need to stop asking me to do things. People had to decide about these issues. Made me feel resentful. Became more experienced. This institution operates this way.

40:30 The reason women's studies became my home is because "I feel driven by the purpose of making the world a better place for all of us to live in... Need to change the paradigm of hierarchy and power." That was where things were coming from in the beginning. Important to keep the big visionary picture.

43:50 Question about links between activism and academics. I think it means something that the first courses were in continuing education. It was about real women wanting to transition into jobs. Mae Carter discussed. That sensibility may have been important. Many women in community were happy to have these things on campus. However tentative we discussed lesbians on campus, were able to do it.

46:15 Early Staffing was related to the problem of how to create a structure where administration was not providing resources. Coordinator and one overarching course was model many used. Required least money and commitment. A lot of things (i.e. in dorms etc) ended up in a place that wasn't really set up to address it and it came out of the hide of people doing it. Mae Carter had patience to incrementally work it.

50:56 No recollection of retreat in Lancaster. I think about the women who were there and how they were. It must have been a heck of a retreat. We figured out how to not let this die.

52:38 -53:01 Asked how had field shifted over 40 years. Take a break first.

TAPE LOG CONTINUED

Page 4 of 5

Counter No. Contents

53:02 Recall a statement in documents that we will be able to put ourselves out of business if we get integrated into the curriculum. Why didn't it happen? What we do, no one else does. The orientation to consistently, incisively critiquing power and privilege and making connections between lived experience and theory. That is what we do and it keeps us in business. Women's studies has changed everything.

56:00 One thing we kept saying was there is no such thing as being objective. Put yourself in it. That was so simple but absolutely brilliant and absolutely advanced. Can see it in different fields now. Relationship and subject matter important now. We were right.

58:30 Idea of interlocking oppressions; looking at race and sex and sexuality. Has been an incalculable service in all the disciplines. (Train horn in back ground) I like the expansion to transnational. "I want to see it done in a way that keeps real people..." "because I am an African American woman and a third generation welfare recipient in my home town of Shreveport La from losing her faith."

59:20 Changes in Universities to address new faculty needs.

59:50 Joke – Got a lot of Grants and was out of Delaware a lot. Comment at dept meeting, question raised about who can we get as a visiting professor... well Gloria Hull can be one. Helping to develop a reputation for UD internationally. Was coming up for promotion. Began to get better sense of my worth. People here couldn't see who I had become.

66:00 Still dealing with contradictions. Talking about sexism and sex roles, Bonnie Scott and I both in English at time when Zach Bowen was chair. Santa suit at Christmas party, and at one point I was on one knee and Bonnie was on the other. It was a charged moment that I recall it.

68:20 Offered named professorship at College of William and Mary, had accepted it but also a one year fellowship at Stanford so went to do that. Went for interview in Santa Cruz, California and offered job. Was released from William and Mary contract. At Santa Cruz, learned as much as I brought. Was time to do something different.

70:50 Impact of WOMS on English. I don't think about my field as English. My field is Black women's Studies, African American literature.

72:00 Working out in a Delaware way. Starting in Continuing Ed. Open bumbling and finding our way which opens things up more.

73:24 How Black Women's Studies became her field. After teaching African American literature, she was teaching Paul Lawrence Dunbar in class. Students in class mentioned Pauline Young, who was aunt of Alice Dunbar Nelson, and she had papers in her house in Arden related to them. Developed relationship with her and shown the papers. Description of papers. If Pauline knew what was in the papers she would never have let me read them. Began to see how much there was to get out. I had the feminist theory knowing

TAPE LOG CONTINUED

Page 5 of 5

Counter No. Contents

that these women in second echelon status did not deserve that status. So began to do rescue work with Dunbar Nelson and women of the Harlem Renaissance. Saw information about their lesbian relationships. Decided not to ignore it because of the opening up in women's studies and also because I felt I had to do what is right. People interpreting it differently. Contentious area for Black women.

82:28 In Combahee days we talked about power and spirituality and I held onto that in my own development. So began to discuss spirituality when people were not discussing it.

83:44 Around 1980 began a Black female literary renaissance, and many had a major component of spirituality in their work. I look at the broad spiritual; energies of the universe. The more one is in tune with it the more powerful you are. My previous book was Soul Talk. Discussion about difficulty talking about different areas of Black women's spirituality, and you know that the overall paradigm may be dismissive.

84:40 Had published a book of poetry. Once I knew we didn't have to be dry scholars and could be metaphoric, it opened me up to poetry. Originally wanted to be a journalist. As an undergraduate first time I left south for summer to go to New Haven CT. Stayed in tower at Yale and worked with New Haven Human Relations Commission.

89:40 Wrote essays as English major, then published poems. Always loved trying to find the word you need to say what you want. Never thought I could write fiction. Once I retired, material started to come to me related to fiction. I let it happen. It is informed by interests in women's issues.

92:07 Discussion of what still needs to be done in Women's Studies. Narrator talking about how issue of gender still a new critique for students. Hull - We do need a social revolution. There is still a disconnect. It is what will make us say what is really valuable. What do we need to do to raise consciousness?

94:57 We haven't succeeded in our mission. Thinking about late capitalism, we no longer have people saying women should be in home raising kids, but see different images with no interventions.

96:20 I think Women's Studies needs to get out there bold and brassy and ask what are we doing when we do WOMS? What are we about? How do you juggle, balance, sacrifice? Is there a way to get to that place. We used to do things like pamphlets, on and off campus collaborations... how do we do that?

98:20 Combahee River Collective - did not live in Boston, but would catch train to Washington, Boston or New York for weekends. More things were going on there. Always went to the annual retreat. We did everything- drummed danced talked, shared work, planned next publications. It was amazing.

101:13 Any wrap up? - No except you really drained me.

101:20 -50:17 My name - started work as Gloria T Hull; in 1992 I changed my name to Akasha. Had always wanted to have an African name but didn't just want to open a dictionary, wanted it to be spiritual. Was in Ghana reading a spiritual book. Akasha is Sanskrit word that means light, luminous and it grabbed me. I took it and made all my friends use it. For long time I was Akasha Gloria Hull.