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### Interview with Diane Williams, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

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## Diane Williams

*It is September 10th, 1999; this is an interview with Diane Williams, who began as a student at Columbia College and held a variety of positions at the school, ultimately teaching in the Liberal Ed Department.*

**So, Diane, if you could tell us, you know, when you came to Columbia as a student, and why you chose Columbia as the college of your choice.**

Well, I came in 1980, because I had been out of school for three years, I'd left the University of Illinois because I'd sort of lost my goal in life, or my mission, and I needed some time to think about what I really wanted to do. And I looked in the newspaper at some different colleges, and picked Columbia because of its wonderful creative arts program, in writing and film and that sort of thing. I was interested in doing that, so I came as a part-time student.

**And why did you choose to stay at Columbia? I mean, did you ultimately finish your degree at Columbia?**

Um, I chose to stay because I was really enjoying the programs. I enjoyed writing, I got a chance to do that, I got a chance to become a tutor during my stay at the College, and I enjoyed the people, the faculty, the other students. So I didn't want to go to another institution, I really wanted to stay at Columbia and finish.

**Who are some of the teachers that you remember, and why?**

Ah, let's see... I remember a number of the Liberal Arts teachers, including Louis Silverstein and Bill Hayashi, because they gave me a different way of thinking. They

were using a very holistic approach to teaching, very humanistic. So it was more than just, you know, memorizing dates or just reading material, or they weren't feeding you answers, they were letting you find your own answers to things. And also, in my own major, which was creative writing, there were people like Randy Albers and Larry Heinemann, and Tom Nawrocki, who were very influential, very important teachers for me. And a number of others, I'm sure, that I'm just not thinking of right at the moment.

**And did you ultimately finish your degree, and then stay on at Columbia? How did that work?**

**How did that transition work?** Well, I finished my degree in 1984, and then I took a year off just to work again, and then I really discovered that I wanted to teach at a college level, so I went back to get my MA. So that's when I became a secretary and a full-time graduate student.

**And what—why don't you speak a little bit to that, the course content you took and what that was like, at the graduate level.** Well, I had a chance to take some interesting courses like Bible as Literature, and some other literature courses, and, of course, writing courses and poetry; and it was a real challenge, because I had to come up with a significant number of pages of fiction and poetry, so it was a real challenge, and I remember working with my advisors, and gaining a lot of experience, and polishing my writing. And I remember Cyrus Coulter was a guest lecturer, and he was really challenging to me, because he was very different. He came from

outside the College, and really challenged me to do the best I could with my writing. And so that was a really rich experience for me.

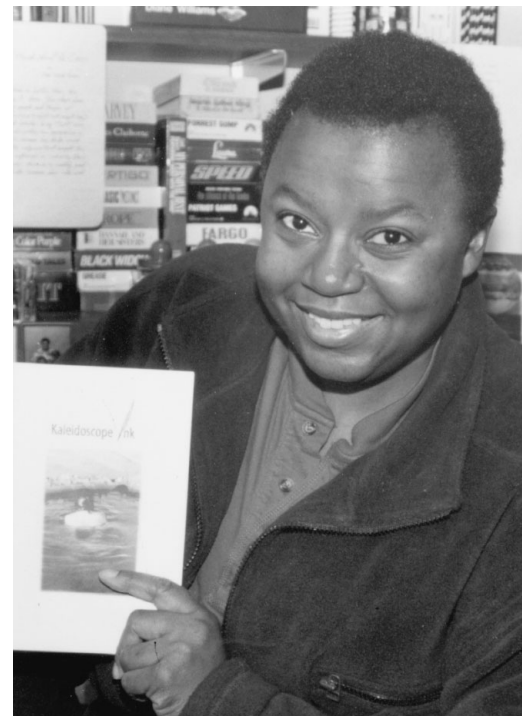
**And who—did you have more than one advisor? Who were they, or who was your advisor?**

I'm trying to remember *(laughs)*... John Schultz was kind of the department at that time, and... gosh, I can see his face, and I can't recall his name.

**Well, if it comes back to you during the course of the interview, you can jump in with it.** OK.

**That bring us up to, you know, when you became a teacher at the school, and what were you teaching, and maybe how your experience as a student... how did that influence your teaching in the classroom?**

I was very fortunate that I had a chance to teach in the Liberal Education Department after I got



my degree. I taught a course called Fundamentals of Communication, which was very good, because it allowed me to use skills in speaking, writing, and reading in one course, and so that was the first thing that I taught. And I was mentored by Bill Hayashi, and so that was very good for me. And then later, I taught English Composition.

**And what was that experience like?**

Actually, it was very interesting, making the transition from student to teacher, because I was very close to my own experience as a student, so I was trying to be as helpful as I could, and you know, bring with me my own experience at the College as a student, and be as helpful and, you know, positive as I could in the classroom.

**Based upon your experience at Columbia—and again, you know, it could be as student or staff member or faculty, how has your—how would you define your personal vision of education, and did that change, or was that shaped by Columbia?**

Well, it was shaped by Columbia, because even now, there's things that we did at Columbia that I still do in the classroom. For example, sitting in a semi-circle, you know, seems like a simple thing, but it taught me that people could actually be in a room together and feel as though as they were part of a community, instead of sitting in rows, and you know, staring at the back of each other's heads. And so I took that with me, and you know, and I try to have a very holistic and humanistic approach to education, so that students feel they're getting some sort of life benefit out of their courses, not just, you know, "Oh,

we have to take this course, that sort of thing." So, you know, learning how to create a community in the classroom really came from Columbia. And I've not forgotten that or... or as I say, you know, that sense of community.

**And would you say that that is part of the mission of Columbia College? If you had to describe the mission of the College, you know, based, again, upon your experience, how would you do that?**

I'd say that it was part of a mission, I think, to create a learning environment that's different, that is more creative and enthusiastic and energetic than some other institutions. You know, Columbia provides a good education, but I think they also provide sort of a life education too, on cooperative learning... cooperative learning and—I'm trying to find some words for this, but—but just, again, that sense that we're all in this together. And that our energy and strength together helped create a more positive learning experience, one that you want to take with you, not leave behind.

**Maybe if you want to expand upon some examples of your own in the classroom, of that cooperative learning, or that building of community. How did you like bring that to, say, a writing exercise or...**

Well, for example, I do writing workshops where my students share their work, whatever it is that they're writing, whether it's a creative writing class or a composition class. They get to help each other with their writing, rather than just depending on me for the answers.

**Hmm. And again, that's something that you felt that came out**

**of Columbia, that grew out of your experience?**

Yes, absolutely. Columbia was my first teaching experience, and since then—that was 1987—and since that time, I mean, we're talking 12 years, and I still value my experiences at Columbia and what I got out of the classroom.

**So when you—and how long did you teach at Columbia?**

Let's see, I taught there on and off for about six years.

**OK, so that was like...**

Until probably 1993 or 1994, I got a full-time job.

**Did the students change during that time, between 1980 and 1993? How would you describe the student population?**

I think students became more courageous in their art. There were things that were on display in the Art and Photo departments that were very, I think, unique and challenging in a way that was different from 1980. I think that people had those sorts of visions, but they were more likely to express them. And we all seemed to be, you know, blossoming more, I think.

**And when you were a student at Columbia, how did it compare to your experience at, say, at U of I? Was it... liberating, or were the students very different from the ones that you were used to being [around]? How would you describe that?**

I think it was liberating, because U of I is a good institution, but again, it's much more traditional. And there were only, you know, perhaps one or two classes that I had during my year and a half there that were sort of very open, and... sort of invigorating, in a sort of a creative way. So I think it was, it was a very

different experience for me.

**And in between 1980 and 1993—and again, you can talk about it from a student's point of view, or from your teaching experience—what were the biggest challenges facing the institution, as a student or as a teacher, that you saw?**

I think as the College gets bigger, and it's still growing, I think as it was getting bigger, the challenge was to manage to keep it... to keep it with an intimacy, to keep it having an intimate feeling, that you could go in the classroom and you weren't overwhelmed, or you didn't feel lost on campus, or that sort of thing. I remember at U of I, because it was so—it was such a big campus that sometimes you just felt swallowed up by that, that you were one of, you know, 15,000 other students or something. And I think at Columbia, one of the things that was most welcome was that you were being taught by people who genuinely were professionals in their field, that was always the big thing that people would say, but also that the classes were intimate enough so that you could ask questions and feel as though your teacher knew who you were, and they got to know your work, and that sort of thing. So I think the biggest problem is, as the institution continues to expand, is to, you know, continue that feeling of intimacy.

**Mm-hmm. And what about as a student? Were there any issues that you faced or felt that weren't being addressed, or had to be addressed at the institution?**

I think the College has done a good job in recent years of addressing differences in the English Department, in terms of cultural differences, and having more classes

that—you know, more women's studies classes, and minority literature classes, and things like that. I think that helps to broaden the audience for the classes, but also gives people a better overview of the world, you know, instead of just having, you know, history—American history—we have also women's history, or you know, things like that, classes in different kinds of literature. You know, Black American Literature or something like that. I think the College has really done a fine job of doing that.

**And what about—now, were you ever full-time staff, or did you work part-time staff while you went to grad school?**

I was full-time staff.

**Full-time, OK. Now, what was the difference... could you give some insight into—or was there very little division between the staff and the faculty? Do you know what I'm saying? Was that another transition, or was that an easy transition?**

Well, that was another transition, because I think the faculty was very cooperative and helpful most of the time, but you know, it is being in a different place, I think, when you're faculty. You know, so it was... you know, I felt as though I belonged in the Liberal Education Department, but you know, it's not the same thing as being faculty.

**Were you a secretary in the Liberal Education Department?**

I was a secretary.

**Oohhh... so you were taking courses in Liberal Ed as a student, then you worked as a secretary—**  
Right.

**And then you taught.**

I was new to the system before that.

**Oh my gosh.**

So I had a lot of different experiences.

**Well, maybe you could elaborate, you know, on what the strength of that department and what the weaknesses of that department were in all those years that spent in all those different roles, kind of.**

The strengths, I think... I think the quality of the faculty and their vision for the classroom as well as the College. I think that was a definite strength. So many different kinds of people, you know, but focusing on educating their students to the best of their ability. I think that was a real strength. I know over the years, some of them—the more... let's see... the more liberal classes were, I think, eliminated, and I thought that was unfortunate. There was a Modes of Meditation class, when I first got there in 1980, that I thought was very helpful, but you know, they sort of streamlined some of those things for the more academic classes, which I can certainly appreciate, but I wish they could have kept both, you know. So you had all the academic classes and also some of the other ones.

**Did you get a sense—and other people have raised this issue, but certainly not everyone—that Columbia is losing some of its uniqueness, that it is becoming... I mean, I'm just thinking of that example that you gave, that we've lost, in the Liberal Ed Department, some pretty unique classes. That it's kind of succumbing to pressures to go more mainstream—was that at all**

**your experience while you were here?**

I think that that certainly has happened in the last few years, and I mean, I certainly can understand, you know, that they want to be more mainstream or more accepted in some cases. But I again hope that they don't lose, you know, the creative edge. [I think] it's wonderful to have, you know, people who write teach writing, and people who make movies teach moviemaking, and you know, because I had an instructor who had written a textbook with another instructor on, you know, writing for film when I first got there. And I think that's a great benefit. So if the College can find a way to keep its, you know, unique place in education, and you know, give people the kind of academic standards that they're looking for, I think that would be great. But it would be a shame for Columbia just to be, you know, another college.

**Right. And you mentioned earlier that you felt one of the major challenges that Columbia had to face was its growth.**  
Yes.

**Is it going to be harder—you know, does that affect the ability to remain creative, do you think?**  
Well, it could. I think, you know, if it's growth that's gone sort of unchecked, I mean—while I'm not saying it's like a kudzu vine, you know, that's just growing wildly, but I mean, if money is invested in buildings, you know, that's terrific. But I think with those buildings, we need to keep the original intent of Columbia, which was to really be a creative arts institution. And I think that's very important, you know. I mean, it's, you know, it's wonderful to say, "Well, we're in the top, you know, 10 schools

academically, you know," if that were the case, but you know, to be that without having that unique place, I think would be a shame.

**We'll change subjects a little bit, but could you spend some time talking about your own work, and again, you know, maybe how that's been an outgrowth from your experience at Columbia? But what you're working on now, what some of the parameters of it might be, and how that was influenced by Columbia or your experience at Columbia.**

Well, I'm still writing, and still, you know, publishing. I don't have a big novel out there yet, but you know, but I've had some publications and some things performed, and right now I'm working on a play for the College of Lake County, it's a date rape play, because they want to address the issue, and so I get a chance to write that. And so I haven't lost the creative energy that I had when I was a student there. Of course, the unfortunate thing is that being a full-time teacher now, I don't have as much time to write, but certainly the energy is still there, and you know, the things that I bring to my teaching that I remember in my own writing, I got from the writing classes there. You know, the vividness of the writing, and things in the classroom, like you know, wanting to take the reader to what happens next, and things like that I still remember from my education there.

**Do people ask—are they curious about Columbia? Is Columbia kind of still an unknown quantity, when you know, people ask about your background or where you went to school, etcetera? Are they curious about the institution?**

Well, I always introduce myself on the first day of class by giving

students information about my background, including Columbia, and so I'm happy to say that I've had several students actually go on to Columbia, either to finish their BAs or to—I have one student who's going to graduate school, or starting graduate school in January. So you know, so I'm very happy about that, [and I do] have positive things to say.

**What do you say to the—how do you describe the school to them, and why do you think they chose to go, and why was it a good fit for them, do you think?**

I guess they were students who were interested in creative pursuits. They want to continue writing, or they want to get into filmmaking, or you know, or other creative avenues like that. And so, you know, I always suggest that to them, that it would be a place where they can—you know, they'll learn a lot, but also they'll be given a chance to sort of grow and expand themselves, too. And I think that's really important.

**That's interesting. Because, you know, it kind of keeps the cycle going. That you know, you left U of I kind of searching for a place, and there's students that you teach that are doing the same thing and end up at Columbia.**  
Mm-hmm, yeah.

**OK. And let's talk just a bit about—maybe—I want to get back to maybe this challenges thing, and again, what about as a staff member? Did you see—we didn't talk about that quite as much. Did you see challenges that the school had to address or face more as a staff member, or different issues from teaching and from being a student?**  
I think some of the issues might have been the—just simply being



able to take care of the part-time faculty, because they're such a vital part of the institution, yet they're in a place that's very different, you know, they're not full-time staff and they're not full-time faculty, and I was always concerned about that, and you know, and their place in the College and that they were recognized as significant. And I think that's still true, at every institution.

**Right. Now, you worked full-time as department secretary—Right.**

**Were you part-time as a faculty member?**  
Yes.

**And did you ever become full-time as a faculty member?**  
No.

**Oh, OK. So when you were talking about that, did you feel that as a part-timer as well, that there was... not the support or the resources available to you, in the department or in the school?**  
Well, I hate to say—I wouldn't want to say, you know, that they weren't available. I think that people were doing the best they could, but as a part-time faculty member, you could, you know, you may not have the space that you need, you know, sometimes, or the—you know, the office space to have conferences or things like that.

**Right.**  
It's a very different—sort of like you're on the go all the time, on the run. So it's very different from, you know, having a place that you can call your own as a full-time faculty member, or even as a full-time staff member. So it's very different in that respect. And I recognize too, you know, as when I

was secretary, that you know, the part-time faculty members would have their own concerns about getting their mail, or you know, not having a key to the office, you know, they couldn't get in at times when the office was locked, or you know, just things like that. I mean, you know, that's an issue, I think, for every institution that has a large part-time faculty.

**And you're aware that the part-time faculty then voted to form a union, to unionize?**  
Oh no, I didn't. That's great.

**Yeah, it was last year. And a lot—I mean, I think the central issue, of course, is compensation. But issues of space and a lot of the things that you just raised were certainly part of the concerns, because it does seem to be... you're in an ill-defined place at the institution. There's so many of you, and yet you kind of are—you know, you're not full-time faculty, you're not full-time staff, and it's—I mean, it's some of the issues that you're raising that certainly was a concern and part of the organizing effort behind the unionization. That's very interesting. I was just jokingly going to say that, too, you must have—if you were—I started teaching part-time—I don't know if we ever met in Liberal Ed—in '90, and we also last year got a new copier that's terrific.**

Oh wow, great! *(Laughs)*

**We were still, you know, limping along on those rehabbed copiers up until, you know, last year. So it's kind of funny that a lot of things hadn't changed, you know, even almost six years after you had moved on.**  
*(Laughs)* I know, the copier issue is a big on at the College of Lake

County, too. We just got new copiers, so...

**Can't get away from it.**

It must be true everywhere. Maybe the turn of the millennium now, people want to give you new copiers.

**Well, what about—can you look back, as a student or staff, again, or faculty, at some of the rituals of Columbia, and what you remember? Say, like graduations, or more the social aspect of the institution?**

Well, one of the things that stands out are the readings that they had for Hair Trigger. Those were really important, because as a student, they gave me a chance to actually stand up in front of an audience and read my work.

**Maybe you should explain what Hair Trigger is, and what those readings—you know.**

Well, Hair Trigger was the magazine put out by the—I guess now they have the Fiction Department, but before, it was the Writing/English Department who put it out. And it contains a lot of student works, and it's won awards, and it's a wonderful magazine. And so the people who were published in it were invited to come and read their work, or people in different writing classes would come and read their work. And so it was really—it was a wonderful experience to just be able to get up in front of an audience and do that. You know, and I think that that helps, you know—later on in life when I got in front of an audience, you know, I could call upon those experiences, you know, what that was like. To be in an auditorium with people and reading and that sort of thing.

And what about any other rituals—like, do you remember graduations, or when you graduated? Or did you attend graduations as staff or faculty?

Yes, I did. Oh, I remember my advisor's name: Andy Allegretti.

Oh, OK.

[How] did I forget that? *(Laughs)* But graduation was really important to me, because I, you know, I had a chance at that time to have my parents come, and really, after having left college for a few years, and coming back, and being able to finish, I actually did go to my undergraduate graduation. I didn't go to my graduate graduation, but I did go to the undergraduate one, and it was a thrill.

And what—I have to—I'm gonna stop the—OK. As a student, what were your impressions of the College President, Mike Alexandroff?

I... well... [let's just say] I don't really—I don't really have very many recollections of Mike Alexandroff, actually, as a student. I think that I probably was immersed in, you know, in my studies, and other activities around school, and my teachers, and I don't really have a memory of him, you know.

Who would have been like-say—was it individual teachers, or was it department chairs that—you know, who figured biggest in the faculty in your experience there? I think probably it would have to be the teachers in the Writing Department, because that was my great passion, so I spent more time there than I did anywhere else, except liberal arts. They had the biggest impact on me.

And maybe if we could just go back to some of, like, the courses that you took that,

again, maybe influenced your future work or what you were interested in.

Oh, I took poetry classes, and now I can't remember my poetry advisor or teachers. Umm...

That's all right. No, I mean, but just—I mean, more importantly, what you took away from it.

Because are you writing poetry now as well?

Oh yes, I'm still writing poetry. And... and the challenge to continue to do better, or to reach for different images, or to find new and fresh ways to say things, I still—I took that away from that course. All my courses, the same sense of importance in the way I used words.

Mm-hmm.

So when I'd say to my students, you know, I really do enjoy reading and writing, because many of them, especially in the composition classes, may not really feel that way, but I really do feel that way. I really do enjoy reading and writing, and you know, and Columbia was a big part of that. I spent so many years there... you know, but that really helped to feed my desire to teach and to write.

And when you first realized that you were interested in that, or in pursuing writing, how have you evolved—obviously, you've grown, evolved, but how have some of the changes manifested? Are you writing about different things now, or how is your work, you know, grown and evolved?

I am writing about different things, and I learned—at the U of I, I was censoring myself, and at Columbia, I learned to stop censoring myself. And that's very important, and I try to get my students to understand that too.

Like what type of things—if you could give an example—would you have censored, and then—

Oh, personal relationships, or, you know, that sort of thing, and then you don't write about them and then you wish you had, or you don't write about them with the sort of honesty that you need in order to make the piece work. And you know, and so I still try to get students to be really comfortable with that, and to say to them, you know, if you don't write with an honest vision, then you know—and I got that from my experience at Columbia. I really grew there. I had such a difficult time expressing myself, and as I continued with the writing classes, I really opened up a lot.

And I'm curious as to—again, maybe if you could go back, you know, how you got to Columbia, that it was—you know, how did you learn about the—was it just the courses that were offered and reading its catalog?

Yes, actually, I was looking in one of those sections—they have those school sections in the paper, and I was looking through them, because I really—I had made up my mind, I wanted to go back to school, and I saw Columbia, and their creative writing program and their film program, and I said, "Wow, this is the place I wanna be, because this really addresses what I want to do in life."

That's interesting, and I'm curious: do you have something handy—and I can turn the tape off and wait—but could you read some of your poetry, or is that a possibility, for the interview to have it on the tape, and you know, be a part of the transcription? Oh.

**Because I can turn the tape off, too, if you can go—**  
Oh, sure. You want something new—I hope you don't want something I have to go back in my archives—

**No, no, no! It's completely up to you, but I think it would be nice for the interview and the transcription, just to have, you know, a piece of your work on as well.**  
Oh, that would be great.

**Does that sound like a good idea?**  
Do you want something long, or—I mean, not too long, I'm sure, but—because I have a poem that I just wrote, about being tired of not being able to write, so—

**Perfect. And do you have it, or should I turn the tape off for a moment?**  
Just for a moment.

**All right. And now, Diane Williams is going to read a piece of her own work, and I'll let you introduce it.**  
OK, thank you.

**While Eating at the Pacific Rim Kitchen [For Melissa]**  
*Between sushi and ginger and plum wine,  
Notions wander behind my eyes.  
Is it that mama has gone,  
Or that papa sits like a stone against my wall?  
Or that you have become my miracle,  
As distinct as rising with the sun in the morning,  
You whose smile is a thousand suns,  
A thousand saviors.  
Let no mortal set this asunder, I declare.  
Sipping your white wine,  
Toasting to a [fabric] just at my fingertips.*

*With this trickling down of romance,  
The still-beating breast of the songstress,  
I no longer crave the life of the itinerant lover,  
Traveling from palm to tongue to gray matter  
Only to find No Peddling signs tacked to each locked door.  
For here is a heart whole enough to open,  
Here is a soul free enough to share,  
Here is a genius pondering all of eternity  
In the quite space of here and now.  
I am entranced, enriched, engorged,  
Looking for the more that you have become,  
The beauty in your face, like a candle aflame.  
I stare at the truth and for once I do not flinch.  
I am not melting like icicles or solstice suns,  
My passion has not forsaken me,  
This muse has not discarded me on some desert  
That I can not cross.  
Instead, you sit facing me,  
The flute and harp accompanying your tongue  
As the gods request a hymn.  
You dip your fingers in the saltiness  
Held in the ceramic dish,  
Place them upon my fingers,  
Knowing love is not a tap to be turned on and off.  
I drift, not sure if this is a gentle breeze  
Or a stormy wind that tickles my spine.  
But I go forward, sure, but of what?  
Of letting go to hold on to, truly potently?*

*I love this peace between us,  
This place within us,  
Held with the grace and certainty of chopsticks.*

**That's beautiful!**  
Oh, thank you.

**That is beautiful! It makes such a difference to hear you read it.**  
**You know, it's got kind of a song to it.**  
Oh, well, thank you.

**That I think if you were reading it off the page, but to hear the author read it, that is beautiful.**  
Oh, thank you.

**It made me feel like we were on some deserted island someplace.**  
*(Laughs)*

*(Laughs)*  
**Well, I think that's a good place to end the interview, unless you've thought of anything else that you'd like to, you know, a memory or a recollection of Columbia that you think is particularly telling or insightful. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?**

Well, I can only say that, you know, I take the wholeness of Columbia with me, I guess. It's still very much a part of who I am as a person, and I think that's really important to know. And talking about it has helped me really fully see that, despite the fact that I talk to students about it, or that sort of thing. It's sort of like... getting a chance to talk about it like this really helps me see how much Columbia is still such a big part of who I am.

**Hmm. I think that's nice. I'm sure... it's nice to know that. I mean, it's a good perspective to have, too, for this Oral History**



**Project, that someone who—you know, it's pretty recent, obviously, that you were here, and in so many different capacities, but kind of a fresh memory of it. So, I think you very much for your time.**

Oh, you're welcome. I'm glad I was able to do the interview. This was great.

**It was very nice. I hope someday we'll meet.**

Yes, absolutely!