

SCMS ORAL HISTORIES: INTERVIEW WITH LINDA WILLIAMS

Thomas Waugh: Hello Linda, this is a great pleasure to have this conversation with you for posterity, about your work. How are you?

Linda Williams: I'm very well, thank you. I am enjoying this conference. I just attended a panel on *Jump Cut's* 40th anniversary.

T.W.: It was a lot of fun talking about the context we both came out of, the 70s and 80s and this kind of alternative film journal. When we segue-way form that does that bring back to you a lot of memories of the context in which you started teaching. I think you started teaching in 1977, right?

L.W.: I did, my first job was 1977 and I was hired to teach film because I'd written a dissertation on film but I had never studied film. I had a degree on Comparative Literature, as a lot of us did back in those days. I was actually hired at the University of Illinois Chicago Circle as it was called back then. Little did I know I was excited because I had read some work by Julia Lesage on *Jump Cut*, but I didn't realize that I was her replacement.

T.W.: She had just been fired?

L.W.: She had just been fired and I stayed at Julia and Chuck's house for a couple of weeks trying to find a place to live in Chicago and got involved in *Jump Cut*. I think that my actual kind of nitty-gritty film education came in my association with *Jump Cut* because I really hadn't been trained as film scholar.

T.W.: In what respects in terms of political writing and editing as well?

L.W.: Right, I had fallen into a psychoanalytic film scholarship. I got a fellowship to go to Paris to work on surrealist cinema, but I was coming straight out of a literary background. I just thought that surrealist cinema was the most confusing and fascinating thing so I wanted to make a study of it and I was lucky enough to get into Christian Metz's seminar. So I had some level of the high level theory but I didn't know anything about teaching film. Everything that I learned, I learned from working on *Jump Cut* and talking to Chuck and Julia.

T.W.: So it was a kind of corrective influence in terms of hitting the ground running?

L.W.: Yes, I think it was. It was a correcting influence in a lot of ways because I was coming from the direction of the highest of high theory, Lacan, which happened to work really well with surrealist cinema. In fact Salvador Daly had been a member of the surrealist group. So I didn't have to apologize too much for imposing a theory, it was an organic theory to surrealism, but I didn't know how to teach anything and I was coming from this French avant-garde context into the permits of English where turns out I was forbidden to teach anything French or anything about English. So I

adapted, I learned, and I soon started teaching other kind of things and working on *Jump Cut*, learning what good cinematic writing was. Although my first book became my dissertation my first book sounded very high theory, really my formation wasn't that. My formation was a little more plain speaking.

T.W.: And this book finally came out in 81, right?

L.W.: Yes it did.

T.W.: I guess *Jump Cut* wasn't really opposed to psychoanalysis as a methodology but they certainly broaden the field, didn't they?

L.W.: Yes, *Jump Cut* was supportive of new theory. I remember reading Julia Lesage's essay on *S/Z*. That was why I was so excited to go to Illinois and Chicago and have Julia as my colleague because she was explaining it very clearly in a way that anyone could understand.

T.W.: That was a wonderful piece based on Barthes. That was late 70s?

L.W.: It may have even been a little bit earlier than that. I remember I read it, gone to France, then came back and got to know Julia and Chuck.

T.W.: And you remained in Chicago for several more years right?

L.W.: Yes, I think I was in Chicago for about 10-9 years, something like that.

T.W.: And then you moved to...(5:36) Lotusland?

L.W.: Yes. I would have liked to get a job in Northern California. I was from California and got a job in Southern California at Irvine.

T.W.: And at that point you sort of branched out from your *Jump Cut* roots.

L.W.: Yes, *Jump Cut* was my education in film and how you do it, and also in pedagogy. I branched out from that yes, but on the other hand I think it's fair to say that my second book was on pornography and had *Jump Cut* not been very open to essays on pornography - including one by you that I remember reading - had I not realized that it was possible to write about pornography through the example of reading you, and Richard Dyer in *Jump Cut*. I don't think that I would have been bold enough to do it myself.

T.W.: I think that special issue was 85, if I am not mistaken, so by this time you are already developing *Hard Core*?

L.W.: Yes by this time...well, I wasn't developing... I guess I should explain. I never set out to write *Hard Core*. I set out to write a book on what I called body genres, what is

to say genres of popular cinema that involved the body. I was going to do musicals, I was going to do even martial arts... and was just interested in the focus on the body but the first genre that I started with was pornography because I thought I knew everything that I needed to say about pornography. I knew that it was bad, that it objectified women, that it was the fetishization of femaleness. I was somewhat surprised to discover that pornography as a genre is something that sets out to do one of the most difficult things that you can imagine doing, which is to portray pressure, to portray bodily, sexual pleasure. I started out writing a quick and easy chapter on pornography and I ended up writing a whole book.

T.W.: And the rest is history.

L.W.: Well, I don't know if it's history but I ended out to my surprise with a book on pornography that was written in the midst of the wars about pornography amongst feminist but which I am glad to say did not get caught up so much in those wars that it couldn't also really just examine pornography as a genre; as a genre trying to deliver pleasure, as a genre that does involve female bodies but that actually delivers ejaculation. In other words, the quest for the pleasure of the female body somehow gets transformed in the course of most hard-core pornography into the visible involuntary ejaculation of the male body. I thought that was the most fascinating thing, why is it the male orgasm that becomes actually the fetish of the search for some kind of confirmation of female pleasure.

T.W.: It was such a courageous book, just to be able to talk about this stuff with a neutral tone and a descriptive...

L.W.: But you see Tom, you had already done it.

T.W.: Well, for both you and for the *Jump Cut* special issue there was a very, very charged context, wasn't there? People have sort of forgotten it. It was right after *Not a Love Story* the film by Bonnie Sherr Klein that *Jump Cut* had critiqued very fiercely by B. Ruby Rich.

L.W.: Yes I remember. I so well remember...

T.W.: Another brave initiative. So *Jump Cut* really took a flight in those words contrary to earlier *Jump Cut* feminist critique of pornography, which as you say were about the objectification of women and all this kind of analysis. It's really a major step forward...

L.W.: And that is where you were calling them on. Is that right?

T.W.: I was trying. I imagine in that special issue wasn't that where they interviewed Candida Royalle and some of the feminist porn?

L.W.: Yes, I think it might have been.

T.W.: What an amazing thing to do in 1984-1985.

L.W.: Yes, yes it was bold.

T.W.: Can you talk a little bit about that? Did you get a lot of flack for that book?

L.W.: I've always been a bit surprised that when I published *Hardcore* I got mostly good reviews. Once I was invited to the University of Michigan, and I thought now I am in trouble because that is where Catharine MacKinnon begun, that is where she was teaching and she was invited to introduce me but she declined. I never ever really had the kind of big fierce debate that I might have had with the anti-pornography feminists. I mean, there was some skirmishes, but for the most part I would say that certainly on the academic side it got amazingly good reception. Although, I do remember once somebody stood up. I gave a lot of talks on pornography and I think really spectacle of somebody starting showing slides and the fact that I would say, "look at this money shot, this is the convention." I was just amazed that you could track a convention that was so steady, so unrelieved in a genre. It's like white hats and black hats in the Westerns. But the only criticism I got was, would a man be able to speak about pornography the way you do. Somebody said if your name was Larry Williams... and I think that was a good point. I don't think...

T.W.: It is not a critique. It's a kind of acknowledgment...

L.W.: Yes, I could do it.

T.W.: The fact that you were a self-declared, proven feminist, right?

L.W.: Yes, a proven feminist...

T.W.: And it was a very good book. A solid book that covers all your angles, so there was really no room for criticism in a way. It was such a solid piece of research and argument, in my opinion. I mean, my homage to...

L.W.: No, I always was waiting for some dire thing to happen but honestly it did not hurt my career at all to have written that book.

T.W.: It went on to a second edition within a decade. What did you incorporate into that second edition? Did you move beyond the first edition?

L.W.: I tried to. I had been ridiculously heterosexual. In fact at the time I was writing it was still very much a minority, gay and lesbian pornography hardly existed. I knew it existed and I think I tried to talk myself into saying that I would not treat that because how could I, a heterosexual, talk about gay and lesbian pornography? But in the course of talking about pornography I discovered... I think I'd rather thought that I wouldn't be welcomed in gay and lesbian circles but I was very welcome. So then I

was emboldened by the second edition finally to talk about just the varieties of pornography's that were out there including gay, lesbian...

T.W.: Fetish, SM...

L.W.: Fetish, SM... I had actually talked about SM, but heterosexual SM. So I even tried to talk about new media and video games.

T.W.: Because the second edition was really on the Internet, wasn't it? 1999?

L.W.: Yes the video revolution was happening when I finished the first edition and then the Internet was happening when... and then you know I didn't really adequately treat it but I gave it a kind of fair try.

T.W.: And you did adequately. It is really an important additional chapter. I have used it endlessly.

L.W.: Have you?

T.W.: Well, the whole book of the second edition. The other shift with the second edition was the illustrations. Do you want to talk about that?

L.W.: With the second edition I had gone along with my editor at the University of California Press who said "you don't want pictures on this." And I actually did because I had this work on Muybridge at the beginning that was very dependent on images. They wouldn't let me do it, and I didn't press too hard because I hadn't gathered them all, I hadn't been thinking that way. But for the second edition I did at least get them to illustrate the final chapter, the new chapter and to my satisfaction I got them to put Muybridge on the Muybridge chapter, and the Muybridge naked woman on the cover. I was at least pleased about that. Since then, every time I've published anything on pornography I've tried to amply illustrate it, to make up from my original sin.

T.W.: You had done a lot of research on Kinsey haven't you, before *Hardcore*?

L.W.: Yes, I have gone to the Kinsey, and you went to the Kinsey.

T.W.: And Chuck Kleinhans was the one who put me on to it.

L.W.: Is that right?

T.W.: Was there the *Jump Cut* connection as well with you, or did you go on your own to Kinsey?

L.W.: That's a good question. I wonder if it was... I don't know.

T.W.: Because he had discovered all that wonderful shoe fetish stuff, but I don't remember the exact sequence...

L.W.: I think, you know, once I committed myself to writing a book that was on pornography I realized that I had to do something with stag films. I don't think your work... your *Hard to Imagine* was out at that time.

T.W.: No, no.

L.W.: I believe it was Arthur Knight and some of this old journalistic scholarship that had, they had said something about the stag films.

T.W.: There were a couple of sort of older heterosexual gentlemen who made comments about the stag films...

L.W.: So I knew that the Kinsey existed and I knew that they had a collection. I really was so glad that I went there. I didn't spend enough time...

T.W.: It's impossible to cover it all, isn't it? It's an amazing resource.

L.W.: Well, it is an amazing resource but it is also falling apart as they would have an undergraduate student screen it, if it was an 8 mm or 16mm, screen it for me in a projector. It would often be like a work-study student rather young. I would sit there in a small room, they would protect it and then the film would fall apart. It was sad because they worked preserving it and they didn't transfer it.

T.W.: It was very scary for me. I think I might have gone in 82, I can't remember, it was very scary because yes I saw things deteriorating also. Their system was pretty slipshod in a way.

L.W.: But it was a treasure trove...

T.W.: It was amazing. Lets keep talking about porn a little bit more. After the second edition you continued working on porn but also on lots of other stuff but on porn then you developed the porn studies collection...

L.W.: I did. By that time I'd arrived at Berkeley and I had to go through an important transformation, which was...although I'd been quite willing to do scholarship on pornography I'd never taught it or I had never taught it seriously. When I was in Chicago I taught a course called "Philosophy in the Bedroom" which is coded and I did do a little tiny bit of pornography, but it was mostly literature because I was in an English department. When I got to Irvine I thought... my revelation was Catherine MacKinnon published an essay in *Ms.* and it was all about how Serbian women were being raped because pornography was being disseminated. Rather than objecting to the fact that they were being raped, she objected to the fact that pornography was being disseminated. I realized at that moment that I really should teach pornography

because this idea of what pornography is, is so kind of vilified and unspecified in many ways. So then I started teaching in a women's studies and a film course combined. I started teaching the History of Pornography.

T.W.: This is 92ish or later?

L.W.: Yes, this should be 91-92 something like that. So I wasn't in a graduate program at that time.

-Recording interruption-

T.W.: So you started teaching at Berkeley around 91-92?

L.W.: No, at Irvine.

T.W.: Irvine, sorry.

L.W.: I know, California all seems the same but there is a big difference between the southern and the other...

T.W.: I know

L.W.: When I began at...*Hardcore* had come out and I was at UC Irvine. So that was when I decided to teach pornography because I realized that the idea of pornography was not specified, that the fact that it had a history...in fact I was one of the few people who knew that history so I began to teach it. I would always teach it with, beginning by reading (22:18) ?, Bakunin?... and fighting the fights, prefacing the whole course with the fights and then saying let's look at what the genre is. That went quite well, there was a little bit of controversy about it, but I realized after a while the students were not interested in those debates within feminism. They were interested in sexual representations, and they were interested in the history of sexual representation. So after a while I dropped the...

T.W.: So the moment of the porn wars had passed?

L.W.: It had passed in a way, and why I was still finding them?

T.W.: It's interesting.

L.W.: But you know it's interesting because now it's come back, today. Now I have a graduate student who is fascinated by those porn wars... Damon in fact, who wants to understand at a deeper level what was being fought out.

T.W.: And it's all come out with the *Porn Studies* Journal that you and I are both involved in, and has just launched the other day.

L.W.: Yes,yes. Are you in it? What have you...

T.W.: I am not in it but I am on the board so...

L.W.: Yes, that just came out I guess yesterday.

T.W.: And it's erupted again this kind of huge controversy...

L.W.: Yes, it seems weird. It seems wrong. In a way it's too bad that pornography can still raise these kinds of debates. Why? I don't quite understand it.

T.W.: Going back to 92, your students were more interested in sexual representation and history...

L.W.: Yes, and at that time the heterosexual males were deeply offended when I taught, I mean truly offended, when I taught gay pornography. I mean they would slam the door as they left during a screening.

T.W.: That is funny.

L.W.: That's changed too.

T.W.: It has. Not 100% but 95% maybe...

L.W.: Well in Berkeley it's, you know, when I started teaching graduate courses in Berkeley...

T.W.: When did you move to Berkeley?

L.W.: In 97, and then I was able to teach graduate courses. At that time the students were so interested and so kind of bright that I was able to put together a volume called *Porn Studies*, which I regretted, I didn't want to call it *Porn Studies*. I wanted to call it *Pornographies on Scene* as opposed to obscene.

T.W.: It's a great book.

L.W.: But that is called *Porn Studies* and I regret that because now there are journals called *Porn Studies*, and I don't think we should call it *Porn Studies*. I think we should call this field Pornography Studies. The difference is, you say porn I say porn because we are familiar with it, we know what it is, we are even a little bit affectionate towards it. But to some people it still is a horrendous thing. I think it sort of tips our hand a little bit too much, you might not agree with this, but it seems to me that to call it *Porn Studies* is to already say I accept it, I don't question it, now let's just sort of see what it does. I think there are reasons for people to be critical of pornography and I think that if you call it Pornography Studies you can be critical.

T.W.: You've taught me into it. I accept that point of view.

L.W.: Do you?

T.W.: Yes, it makes sense.

L.W.: That is what my essay on the first issue of the Journal says.

T.W.: Okay, I haven't looked at it yet but I'm going to. But coming back to that collection that was like mid 2000s, I can't remember...

L.W.: Yes, 2004.

T.W.: 2004. Full of work by your graduate students and I am proud to be in it.

L.W.: Yes I was very happy to have you on it.

T.W.: And a few other important gay authors, right?

L.W.: Eric Shaefer...

T.W.: And how was it received?

L.W.: It's still in print. It's doing well I think.

T.W.: 10 years later.

L.W.: Only I just wish I called it what I wanted to call it.

T.W.: I would leave that go...

L.W.: Okay I'll let it go.

T.W.: And just to finish up on these merits of... is it three years ago *Screening Sex* came out or more?

L.W.: 2008.

T.W.: 2008, six years ago. Tell us about the context for that.

L.W.: *Screening Sex* was a book that I felt that it was filling in the blanks. Having worked on pornography I thought that I had something to say about sex in general, and especially in American screens, and especially in this way that Americans receive sex compared to Europeans. By this I mean, you know the whole idea of the European film, being the racy film, the sexy film, and I thought in my own history the first sex I ever saw on screen was the rape on *Wild Strawberries* and the rape in *Two Women*.

Both rapes, both instances of violent sex, maybe it's bad, maybe it's good, I don't know, but those two scenes absolutely got me. I mean I felt sexual reactions to them. At first I thought okay I've been traumatized, you know poor me, but then I thought no this is the way things happen. So this is not a memoir but I do try to look at the history of sex, screening sex from Edison's *The Kiss* to *Shortbus* from the point of view of how we have kind of felt the sex. Looking at the high points of change, the production code and the end of the production code. I have a first chapter on kisses, just on kisses, back in the days when a kiss was the only sex that you could see, and then I go up to *Shortbus*, but I look at some European work like, specially the European work like *Intimacy* or Catherine Breillat.

CUT – Tape Change

T.W.: We are talking about *Screening Sex* and you're talking about your process and the scope of the book. I have used it in teaching and one of the things that my students appreciated from the original elements of the book was the first person, your reflection on your own experience as a cinephile, a teenage cinephile and can you pick up there?

L.W.: I was a little hesitant to bring myself in, you know, scholarly objectivity and all that, but I finally realized that for example the fact that I had absorbed the Hollywood production code period by watching old movies on television with my mother when I was a kid, and that I had lived through the end of the production code, and had seen those foreign films that had excited me. For example I remember seeing *Hiroshima Mon Amour* on television with my mother in the room, and that scene so powerful at the beginning. I didn't actually write about that but nevertheless I did just try to bring in my own experiences. For example when we went to see with a group of people *Deep Throat*. How did I respond to it? I mean just as best as I can remember, and I remember being embarrassed and laughing out loud, which is sort of what everyone was doing. That made me think that really was really one of the important things about this film. It was so jokey that it kind of relieved you of the embarrassment of sitting with a bunch of people and watching sex.

T.W.: It's bad jokey isn't it?

L.W.: It's very bad jokey, its terrible.

T.W.: But my students love laughing at it or else they get very stressed out.

L.W.: Yes they get. It's a way to diffuse a lot of things. And I think... I don't know if it was intended, but it worked that way.

T.W.: The book was prophetic in a way because film studies now is all about first person response, carnal resonance, affect and bodily reactions, isn't it?

L.W.: Yes but I don't think you want to go too far in that direction.

T.W.: No, but it is important to acknowledge it isn't it?

L.W.: Yes, I think it is important to acknowledge it.

T.W.: So we've been talking nonstop about pornography but all the while you were working on lots of other stuff. Shouldn't we talk a little bit about that? We've also been talking almost exclusively about your research and writing, but we should maybe also be talking about your, well we've been also talking about your teaching, but tell us about your research on melodrama and race? How that started and where that came from?

L.W.: Well like a lot of feminist film scholars who had used Laura Mulvey as a kind of The Bible of how to think about the problem of women's pleasure in cinema I had, I think a lot of us who were devoted to Mulvey nevertheless wanted to work around it and find ways to exceptions to Mulvey. One of the things that I did, along with a lot of other feminist film scholars of this period, was begin to look at women's films because so-called women's films were films for women. You know women were mostly relating to women, I mean there were the romances but you know in a soap-opery melodramatic and somewhat degraded way these were films for women in which women could go cry at the suffering of...

T.W.: So there were also body films?

L.W.: Well, I would later come to say that yes. But for me it was a feminist gesture to look at women's films. Only later I begin to realize, women's films that is a problematic category as Mary Anne Doane wrote a book about it. Somehow it gradually evolved into a broader interest in melodrama, not as a genre, but as I came to see it as a mode, as a very pervasive mode in American culture. So I wanted to write about that as my next big project, and the problem with that is that I looked around and I see melodrama everywhere, you know it is a silly term that is used to denigrate a lot of films, cheap emotion, excessive emotion, pathos, music etc. but actually melodrama has a history and it changes and its always absorbing different forms of realism. So, once you understand – Christine Gledhill taught me this – once you understand that melodrama is not opposed to realism then you have a very interesting mode that is the way in which most cultures deal with the contradictions that exist within that culture. In looking around for a way to write about melodrama that would not be too diffuse I realized that... when I was living in southern California at the time that O.J Simpson made his so called scape in the white bronco and I found myself a long with everyone else absolutely glued to the screen and fascinated by this case, following the trial. Why was I so fascinated? Because I believe that a white women had been killed with ultimate impunity by a black man. Now, I did not consider myself a racist but I really had inevitable racial feelings about the verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trial. So I really wanted to understand that better, and the way I could understand that was actually to look at the history of American melodramas of black and white in which, on the one hand, and I really went back to the mid 19th century, the first moment of really

strong sympathy by white people for black people was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Now, everyone hates *Uncle Tom's Cabin* now because the Uncle Tom is a stereotype but it was brand new to feel pathos for the human suffering of the Christian slave. Then, I was teaching *Birth of a Nation* and I realized that *Birth of a Nation* was the adverse of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and in fact that *Birth of a Nation* kind of concludes its last big spectacle with a cabin that is field with the former enemies of North and South who are fighting for their Arian birthright. Then I looked at Thomas Dixon the man who wrote *The Clansman* upon which *Birth of a Nation* was based and I realized that he was in fact re-writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the beginning. He had characters named Simon Legree in one of his... I think its called *The Leopard's Spots*, so I realize there is a kind of continuity here and what we have, and this is what led into the O.J. Simpson trial was a melodrama of black suffering, in which the black women on the jury saw when they looked at the O.J. Simpson case. Then there is the melodrama of the white women suffering at the hands of the black beast, which is Dixon's *The Clansman/ Birth of a Nation*. In a way the American culture in its racial fixity has been playing out that melodrama of black and white. So I just took it through the *Jazz Singer* or *Gone With the Wind* to roots of two Rodney King and O.J. Simpson. I tried to explain to myself why I have felt the way I felt about that trial.

T.W.: You continued on this topic a little bit further did you, after that book came out? When did this book come out?

L.W.: It came out September 2001.

T.W.: Oh my God! Did you continue working on this area?

L.W.: I've continued working in the area of melodrama but I realized that the melodrama of black and white was in some ways a narrow way. Now I am trying to think more broadly about melodrama and I have just written a book on *The Wire* in which I try to see it from the racial melodramatic perspective.

T.W.: This is on what you presented the other day?

L.W.: A little bit, yes.

T.W.: I think some people raised their eyebrows when they heard Linda Williams was writing a book about *The Wire*.

L.W.: Oh did they? That is interesting, why?

T.W.: Well, television just didn't seem to be you. I don't know.

L.W.: I threw myself into television thinking, wow this is the next wonderful thing! What I discovered to my mind is that *The Wire* is really an exception there is nothing that good. I don't know if there ever will be anything that good, I hope so.

T.W.: There is a lot of noise about the quality television of the last decade right?

L.W.: Oh sure! And *The Wire* proves it. It is really quality television but I think what people often do I many scholars have done this with respect to *The Wire* is they say, it's tragedy, it's a long novel, it's Balzac, but it's actually a really good institutionally based serial melodrama.

T.W.: And it also has entered your pedagogical practice?

L.W.: Yes I have taught three courses on it.

T.W.: And how did that go?

L.W.: First time I didn't know what I was doing and it was too long, how do you handle a 60 hours work. Second time I got a little bit better, concentrated on fewer seasons. Third time I already had written part of the book so I could try it out. It was a wonderful experience of learning something new and having a class to work with.

T.W.: Okay, so we have been talking about 50 min. believe it or not, and we've covered most of your research... have we sort of skied over any of your publications or research in general areas?

L.W.: No I think we are doing fine. I can't imagine anyone who wants to listen to this.

T.W.: They are also interested in questions about the context when you started teaching and writing, and perhaps how that context has evolved almost 37 years later in terms of institutions, the classroom, and the technological infrastructure. Do you have any reflections? Do you recognize yourself now in the classroom in terms of where you were in 1977?

L.W.: In 1977 when I first started to teach I was teaching composition, I wasn't...well maybe I taught one course that had some film on it. I do remember once that I was showing a film on a little TV monitor with a VHS tape, which is what we did then, and I remember that somebody - there had been some research done at our university on *Star Wars* or some of the video graphics that went into it, I think that is what they call it then - on this TV monitor that I was teaching on some of this stuff was there and the students were just transfixed. I think I was at that time trying to teach them something about Luis Buñuel, I felt totally upstaged by that material. So technically of course everything has changed. When I would teach a film back in the late 70s we would rent it on 16 mm. I think I was enough of a fetishist of cinema at that time. It was rare, you know, you had the film for a little while you show it to the class and then it gets back. So I have this thing that was an attachment with a light box on my camera and I would photograph frames against the light and occasionally burn them because I would get too close to the light. Then I would send it to a lab over night and then I would have my slides from the film and I still have these slides. It was my way of trying to hold on to it. It is kind of futile, now that we have DVDs where you can stop

and take snapshots, because I would see the film differently each time but I would be stuck with the slides that just reflected my interest in a particular thing. But I was always trying to freeze it, and I spent hours and hours and hours doing that.

T.W.: Wow! My only experience with that was reproducing stills for publications. So this is what you have to do teaching?

L.W.: Well, what I felt I had to do in order to have command of the film because it was so ephemeral.

T.W.: And when you moved to Irvine did things gradually evolve with the infrastructure?

L.W.: No, we never had a good enough infrastructure. We never had enough materials, not until I got to Berkeley would I say that there were enough materials. We had a good video library, a good DVD library. It was a kind of freedom I think, not everyone would say this, to get away from the 16mm prints and to have DVDs, and to be able to rip out a DVD. Now I just got the Blu-ray of *Shoa*. I didn't know there was. I was at the Criterion booth and there was a Blu-ray of *Shoa*, that's amazing.

T.W.: I wonder what implications that would have for teaching.

L.W.: I don't know. But I was teaching *Shoa* recently and a student said, "you know there is a Blu-ray." I thought oh God!!

T.W.: Moving to Berkeley was your first experience teaching graduate students, right? Tell us about how that was a shift in your pedagogy.

L.W.: I was a little afraid to teach graduate students, because they seem so smart but I learned that they are not as smart as they seem and that they sort of appreciate in a way slowing things down and not just sort of skimming over things theoretically, which I think is a tendency of graduate students. So although when I first started teaching I was the theoretical person because I had been to France and I had absorbed all of this material and then gradually over my career – and I did get hired also into the Rhetoric department at Berkeley, which is a very theoretical place – I found myself to be the less theoretical of the people and that that's been a kind of natural... I mean it's not that I don't read theory is just that I don't want to start from the point of theory. I actually had the conversion experience when I was listening to Žižek give a talk once at Irvine. Everyone was trying to figure it out if it was the big *outré* or the little *outré*, these sort of hair splitting things. I knew the language, and I knew Lacan, but I realized that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life worrying about those things and Lacan. Even though Žižek could make it all very entertaining. At that moment I think I started backing away from theory as the reigning interpretive model for understanding.

T.W.: I didn't realize we would be talking about a conversion experience, this is fascinating.

L.W.: I was really just don't liking the way Žižek was talking, and the way other people were responding and thinking aha no...actually I became more historical at that point.

T.W.: I never thought of you as a non-theoretical writer but more someone who uses theory accessibly and clearly, and lucidly.

L.W.: Yes, but you know those are all insults if your point of view is Heidegger or whatever...

T.W.: Of course, that is not my point of view. So now you consider yourself more as an historian?

L.W.: Now I consider myself a little more historically grounded, somewhere in-between you know?

T.W.: Graduate pedagogy also keeps you in a way more influenced in the future of the discipline in a way would you say?

L.W.: Yes, although I can't say I ever thought of it in that way. Graduate students are wonderful sponges who are hungry for models and knowledge, and theory, and films, and I just try to provide them. I actually do not think about control over the discipline.

T.W.: They might just cut this out, but I am going to take a look here and see if there are any areas they wanted us to touch on at least...that we hadn't... I don't see any specific; do you have some things you were hoping to be able to touch on?

L.W.: No, It feels like I should start asking you questions.

T.W.: I feel that I am very present in this conversation so don't worry about that. Now that you said that you are sort of on cusp for retirement and you look back, I guess you have to do this on grant application all the time, what would you list as your major accomplishments?

L.W.: Ok, making it possible to talk frankly about what sex does in various representations on screen and being sort of down to earth about that. Certain feminist essays, in which I would try to understand from a feminist perspective, for example, I wrote an essay on *Stella Dallas* a long time ago where I think I was really just trying to think about it from the point of view of someone like my mother. How would my mother understand that? Actually I think I also had internalized my mother who did not go to college as somebody who I would like to understand what I write, because she used to put - even *Hardcore*, which is not easy for her - but she put it on the coffee table...She was both proud and a little ashamed, but she was more proud. I wanted my mother to be able to read what I wrote. I'm not sure that she understood that book but increasingly I think I have tried to write for someone, as broadly, that would include my mother. The melodrama work I think both what I've tried to accomplish is to

understand the history of racial injury and to understand, even though, it's not on white racial injury is no where near as great historically as black racial injury it nevertheless figures in this back and forth of the melodrama of black and white. And then to try to imagine how someone can get out of the bid of that kind of dilemma, which is one of the things that I've tried to do in *The Wire* book, which isn't quite out yet.

T.W.: Writing for your mother sort of is equivalent to in a way being a public intellectual, speaking outside of academia, speaking to the public. You consider yourself a public intellectual?

L.W.: No, I've never felt like I was because I think that a public intellectual should know a little bit about everything and I don't.

T.W.: But, you are always called on repeatedly by the media to pronounce on eruptions of sexual politics on the public sphere, aren't you?

L.W.: Yes, but unfortunately the media usually has such a low level of understanding that I don't feel very intellectual saying anything to them. But I understand what you are saying; the writing for my mother could be like being a public intellectual. I'll accept that if it means that, yes.

T.W.: I would say.

L.W.: Ok.

T.W.: So, why don't we stop there?

L.W.: Yes, great, it sounds like the place where to stop.