JOB HISTORY

(from a feminist "retrospective")

IT BEGAN as an interview for a student paper. . . .

Thu, Sep 23, 2004 16:42

Hey Grama Rain
For my Labor study: Women and Work, I have to interview 3-5 of my female family members and write a report on each, and I would like you to be one of them. These are the questions:
~What kinds of paid jobs have you held, approximately how old were you when you held them and what work did they entail? (in school and as an adult)
~What concerns if any, did you have in any of these jobs about working conditions, wages, benefits, hours, relationship to family responsibilities, sexual harassment, etc.?
~Was there any resistance within your family to you holding any of the jobs?
~Why did you choose these jobs?
Thanks so much. If you don't have the time to answer the questions its ok i know your a busy lady, but i would be so grateful if you did. My paper is due the 30th next week so i need it before then. Thanks again
C.

Thu, Sep 23, 2004 21:33

Wow, C., that's a tall order. You have no idea how many jobs I've had! I'll do my best to get it to you by late Monday.
Grama Rain

Sun, Sep 26, 2004 23:16

Hey, C.,
I finished it a little early. It's almost 9 single-spaced pages and only takes me up to 1972 (with a couple of flash-forwards to about 1990). I enjoyed writing it, and I even learned a few things. I didn't specifically answer your questions, I had to ground them in the overall picture. But somewhere in there, I'm sure you'll find stuff you can use for your paper. Hope you get a good grade!
Grama Rain

Mon, Sep 27, 2004 8:12

Thank you soooooo much! Wow that's a lot of info. I better get started. I'll let you know how i do.
C.

IN THE END, C. forgot to tell me her grade. I only recently learned that she'd received an A.

As for me, at about 1972 in my reply I ran out of time and energy. I tried to do a few flash-forwards but didn't mention being a rock critic, and hardly discussed being an artist. One of these days, I'll put down the whole story....

My First Job

When I started college in 1951, I was going to major in History. But after a course in Central European history, I knew I'd never be able to read fast enough. I couldn't stop sub-vocalizing! So I decided to major in Spanish Literature. But after I got married and had a baby, I realized I would have to get practical. So I switched to Economics because I thought that would give me better job prospects. In my senior year, I went on a few interviews through the Career Center at Wellesley. But they weren't too interesting. In those days, it seemed like the majority of recruiters, even at a high prestige women's college like Wellesley, were fashion retailers. I went through the motions. I got dressed up, took the train to New York and talked with the people at Bergdorf's and Alexander's (opposite ends of the fashion scale). But it was clear, women retail buyers could only go so high. You would spend most of your life in dreary back rooms on the store floors, talking to low-level vendors with carpet fleas biting your legs.

That's when I decided my training and interests were best suited for work in the government. It was the only "equal opportunity" employer at the time and, amazingly, it paid better than any of the other jobs. You took an exam and if you passed, you were in, even if you were a black female. This was 1956, and at that time, the Federal Government had an elite entry program called the Management Intern Program. You had to take a special exam in addition to the regular entry exam. I decided to try my luck even though everyone said it was almost impossible to pass. About 20,000 people sat for the MIP test around the country, and 500 passed. I was one of them. But then there was the second part, a one-hour oral interview where each candidate was grilled individually by five professionals. Of the 500 who'd passed the written, 200 made it through the oral, and I was still in. So that made me the first girl from Wellesley ever to pass the MIP, and I felt hot!

Now came the next stage, you had to bid for the jobs on offer at different government departments and agencies. In retrospect, I can see that this was the early-warning sign. Out of the final 200 people who'd passed the exam, just 6 of us were girls (we still called ourselves "girls" then!). And of these six, three of us

ended up together at the Department of Labor. To put it mildly, Labor and Agriculture were the two least "sexy" departments in all of Washington. State, Treasury, Defense, any of the intelligence services, those were the sexy ones. Not one of us had put Labor as one of our top three. It seems the Department of Labor was the only one willing to take us in. . . and we were all “Ivies,” the best of the best. So I went to work as a research economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Well, another early-warning sign came just a year later. There was an evaluation of the 200 management interns that told them their future career prospects. Nearly all the guys we knew in the program were told they could reach Deputy Assistant Secretary, the highest possible career post. But the biggest cap any of the women got was GS-13, or division chief, which was 5 steps below Deputy Assistant. Me, I got GS-12. I think the Department of Labor knew before I did that I wasn’t cut out for government service! Still, though it was the most welcoming to women, even at Labor there were limits. You could look around and see that division chief was as high as any woman would get.

Another aspect of the work that affected me as a woman was that — and again, I only understood this in retrospect — at the time, I was still trying to be a single mother (ultimately I wouldn't succeed). Nowadays, nurseries in federal buildings are routine. But at that time, there was no support at all, you were lucky to get maternity leave. I had moved as a young woman in my early 20s to a strange town and had no family nearby to help. And the peer group I was working with consisted only of young single people, so there was nobody to call on or exchange with. It’s hard to remember, but in the 1950s, most mothers didn't work, and there were no support groups or childcare cooperatives for those that had to — in fact, such concepts were seemingly invented in the late 60s. Even though my starting salary was relatively generous, I still couldn't afford a nanny. So I had to find a nursery school, then rush home after work before it closed to pick him up. God forbid my child should ever be sick! In the summer, I had a two-week vacation, but the nursery school shut down for five weeks. I had no choice but to send him to a sleep-away camp. He never forgave me for this.

My Next Job (Interview)

In 1961, after five years, I decided to leave the government. I'd sent my son to live with his father, who was living with his parents. It was clear they could provide him a more stable home. And before leaving Washington, I tried to line up a more interesting, better-paying job than being a researcher and intelligence analyst. My sister Devonia and her husband, who were living in Connecticut, had a neighbor and close friend who was the head of CBS Television News, so I asked them to arrange an interview. It was all very informal. He took me to lunch in one of those busy, high-powered Manhattan restaurants that you see in films. I thought he was enjoying the attention I was paying him, we weren't really talking business, the conversation was just wandering. As the lunch was coming to an end, he brought us abruptly back to the point and said, "So, what would you like to do?" I told him, "I'd really love to be a writer for CBS News." For sure, I knew better than to say I wanted to be an on-camera reporter; at that time, I don't think I'd ever seen a woman reporter, let alone a black one. But from today's perspective, what he said next was truly astonishing. He answered in the most off-handed voice you can imagine: "Lorraine, I can tell you that no woman will ever write for CBS News. But we can see about a job for you as a researcher." Oh.My.God. . . . a researcher again! I felt totally done for. Of course, had the lunch taken place eight years later, in 1969, though he may have thought it, he wouldn't dare say as much. Someone could get the law after him.

Going Into Business for Myself

It was a while before I would have what you would call a "normal" job. When I look back on what happened after that, I can see that I was beginning to drift. I was trying to find

something to do in which I could make a mark. By 1967, I'd already spent a year in Europe trying to write a novel and learning that I couldn't, going back to graduate school (the Iowa Writers Workshop, where I translated the novel of my instructor, a Chilean writer, which was published by Knopf), then getting married again to a fellow grad student and moving to Chicago. My new husband was making enough money in the film production company he worked for that I didn't have to work, and for a few weeks I didn't. But I soon got bored. Those were turbulent times in Chicago.

I didn’t want to do job applications cold, I was still afraid of a racist response. So I answered an ad on the radio for substitutes to teach in the inner-city (can you believe they advertised?). The schools and the kids were so troubled, they couldn't get anyone to go there. I lasted exactly three weeks — and then I broke down and cried in front of my fourth-grade class. There was one little girl who could only come to class on days she could borrow shoes to wear! And every day, since there were not enough pencils and copybooks to go around, the kids who didn’t have would grab them from those who did when they weren’t looking. Then they’d break out into fistfights because they would accuse each other of stealing. One day, two boys ended up rolling on the floor between their desks and I couldn’t break them up, and I just cried. I knew it was the end. The next day I called the principal and told him I couldn’t come in again.

I took a job as a cocktail waitress in a blues club owned by a friend of my husband's. He told me I could make a lot of money, and I did. Three times as much as I'd made at the Department of Labor. It was amazing. But every guy who gave me a tip thought it gave him the right to pinch my ass. So I stayed there for three months, and then one afternoon, I went down to the Illinois State Employment Office to see if they might have a *real* job to refer me to. I was in luck. That very morning a call had come in for someone to be a translator and help manage a translation agency. I said I could translate. Boy, could I translate! I could do Spanish and French, and with the help of my six years of Latin, make out Portuguese and Italian. And after living in Denmark for a year, I could even take a stab at Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian. I went on the interview. The lady who owned the

translation agency, Mary Baldwin, was 90 years old. She told me that she had been the first woman graduate of the University of Chicago and had been an official interpreter at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition! By now, she had clung on to her translation business and just wanted someone to turn it over to. Its furniture, and most of its clients, seemed to date from the 1890s, too. But by some miracle, Hugh Hefner and *Playboy*, who in 1968 were still based in Chicago, had picked Miss Baldwin's Academy Translation Bureau out of the phone book, probably because it began with “A”. If they only knew! The *Playboy* account was keeping her afloat. It's a funny thing about translation. . . if you can do it, no one cares if you're male or female, white or black, young or old. But you have to get that foot in the door.

I worked for Miss Baldwin two days a week, and for three days a week I continued the volunteer work I’d begun while I was at the blues club. . . for Jesse Jackson and his organization Operation Breadbasket, the precursor to PUSH. I don't remember now how I'd found out about Jesse. Perhaps I’d read an article. He and his friend David Wallace had just graduated from U of C Theological Seminary but were still squatting in married student housing with their families. They were too poor and too busy to move, running Breadbasket alone. They were beginning to make news. I was the first volunteer, but after Dr. King's assassination, many more came on board. A few months after I arrived, Calvin Morris and Willie Barrow were appointed. But for a while, the brain trust was David and me. The most important thing I did while I was there was write a long memorandum to Jesse titled "The Difference Between Power and Influence." After my five years working for the government, I suspected he didn’t have a handle on the difference. He was so impressed that he made my memo the topic of the SCLC's national training week for ministers that year. But I soon had to stop being a volunteer.

The translation business was starting to take off. When Miss Baldwin died, I dropped all but her *Playboy* account. I had learned that the Encyclopaedia Britannica, also based in Chicago, was having trouble finding someone to properly do their work. In preparation for what would be only the third basic revision to the encyclopaedia in its history, "Britannica 3," the publishers had

done a survey. They had learned that they now sold more copies of the Encyclopaedia in foreign-speaking countries than in countries that spoke English and so had decided to change their long-standing policy. Instead of the old-style monument to English-speaking scholarship, they would open up the contributorship: articles would now be written by the world's expert, no matter what language they wrote in. But they hadn't found translators who could match the Encyclopedia's style. I felt confident, so I went for it. I proposed doing two articles on spec, one from Spanish and one from French. If my translations were good enough, I would get the contract. I did, but the flood of articles was so great, I soon had to stop translating and become an editor for the translators I had to hire. The business was run out of my home. There were four electric typewriters (it was before computers!) going all day long. I would go over the translations to make sure they were letter-perfect before turning them in to the Encyclopaedia.

And this was when I discovered a talent I hadn't known I had or even that such a talent existed. I had a natural aptitude for language and with my Girls Latin School education, somehow I could invariably spot when something illogical had crept into the vocabulary or syntax of the English translation. This meant that all I had to do was focus on the clarity of the English, and I could edit translations from languages I didn't know. . . about subjects I was completely unfamiliar with. Well, the day I edited the 50-page article on quantum physics. . . when my last math had been algebra. . . which had been translated from Russian, of which I knew not a single word, was the day I made my decision. Either I stayed in Chicago and used this skill to build a business, or I had to leave to keep searching for what I was put into this world to do.

It’s funny. This peculiar skill came in handy about two decades later, by which time I was living in New York. A friend of a friend, a guy I’d met at dinner parties over the years, was working at Citibank, which had pioneered the ATM machines. In the late 1980s, Citi was just starting to translate its ATM screens for machines worldwide. But like the Britannica, they’d found it wasn’t so easy. They had tried three different agencies, and none had worked. This acquaintance remembered that I had done

something like this a while back and asked if I could help. I agreed but I was a bit scared because, this time, I had to do it in reverse. Now I couldn’t monitor the logic of the English translation, because all the translations were going the other way — from English into the European and Asian languages. I would have to set up a company, select teams of translators, then supervise the translation sessions to guarantee my final product to the bank. In the end, I think it was my visual acuity that saved me. It shocked me. I could compare translations by three different translators into Japanese and tell where and when each one was wrong. . . just by focusing on inconsistencies in kanji characters that I didn't know at all! This was different than language ability. To be honest, I still don't understand the skill I have. I just knew I could count on it. And I wasn't going to argue with something that could make that much money.

So why am I not still in the translation biz? Well, some of it was timing. I'd come to Chicago because of my husband's job and never felt at home there. And as the Britannica revision was coming to an end, so was my second marriage. In my mind I was already moving back east to New York. Several years later, with Citibank, as the project was winding down, I was already busy with my art career.

But the deeper reasons tie in with your paper on women's issues. All three of my big clients, Playboy, the Encyclopaedia, and Citibank, had more or less fallen into my lap. I hadn't gone out looking for them. And they were so grateful for my help, I hadn't had to acquire any of the normal accoutrements of a business other than a phone and a bank account. I didn't even have stationary or business cards. But it's a law of business that to make it work, you have to keep adding clients. Sooner or later, the job is finished and the old client doesn't need you anymore, or not as much. To maintain a business and make it grow, you have to commit yourself to the task of PR. Maybe I was afraid. Or perhaps I just didn't have access to advice. My competitors in the translation business wouldn't give me information, that's for sure. And there weren't any business people in my social circle. Or perhaps I didn't know how to ask, or where to go for input.

But beyond the usual problems women had in that era of lacking know-how, I had the additional impediment of being black. With my foot already in the door, I knew that I could always prove myself. But faced with growing a business, I feared the moment of the "first encounter." Translation is a peculiar business; people have to trust deep-down in your absolute knowledge of the language. I knew, for instance, that blacks could not get jobs teaching English in Asia, because Asians didn't trust that they would speak English properly enough to teach them. Eventually the quality of the work would speak for me, but I wasn't sure I could get the business off the ground and to that point. I may have been wrong.

Still, I don't regret not having gone that route. The fact is, I didn't want to live my life as a translator. Translation is a service profession that no one really values. It requires enormous talent and intelligence to do it well. And if I had those qualities, I didn't want to use them in the service of someone else's work, to be the "invisible contributor" that helps an author's novel live in another language, for example. I wanted to use those qualities for myself and for my own work. The only desire I can remember having almost from the beginning was to express myself and make a mark. I had to take the plunge and commit to art.

Being an Artist

C., I've run out of time. Suffice to say, becoming and being an artist is the only challenge I've never tired of. I'm still here. But as for women's issues, it's the samo samo. When I started thinking about art in the 70s, there were basically no blacks in the mainstream art world, and only a handful of women. Later I was in feminist organizations that fought successfully to help change the art world's awareness of this situation. But even though there are now a few blacks and many more women than there once were, contemporary art is still primarily a white male world. "*La lutte continue!*" as they say in French. The struggle goes on and on.