

Dr. Sherrill Grace (English)
Interviewed by: Zoya Harris, 2000

ZH: I guess we should start with the first question. What kinds of research do you do? How would you describe it?

SG: Well, all my life I've done literary research. I'm an English professor so my research has always been literary research. However, it has been, as well, highly interdisciplinary. Fairly early in my career, really almost immediately after completing my Ph.D. in 1974, I started doing what today we call interdisciplinary research. My research is based in aspects of literary studies, but includes work on theatre, on the performing arts, music and film, and also an increasing variety of theoretical bases. There wasn't very much feminist theory available when I finished my Ph.D., so that's been something that has been integrated increasingly over the years. For example, gender studies, discourse studies, a lot of French theory, and theories that will allow me to work across disciplines - so semiotics is the key here.

ZH: You said you've done research in this area for awhile, but I guess you started off at a different point and it changed over the years?

SG: My research has changed a lot over the years. Yes.

ZH: How so?

SG: Well I graduated from a very traditional English department with a very traditional English degree. My dissertation was on Malcolm Lowry, a great dead white male writer [Zoya laughs]. And a fairly traditional methodology, looking at archives. I was at McGill, but I came out here to look at the manuscripts (at that time never realizing I would end up out here, as it turns out I have). Looking at manuscripts and doing archival research is fundamental research in the humanities. Then, over the years, the work has become much more interdisciplinary, though still fairly archive-based actually. I still work with archives, looking at original manuscripts, looking at, if it's film, original footage, or screening films, or if it's paintings, looking at actual works or looking at vaults or collections of works in art galleries, but still going back to whatever the equivalent of that original manuscript would be, whether it's literature or whether it's in another form.

In the case of music I've used the Canadian Music Centre; there's a great archive here in Vancouver for that. So, archival based, but increasingly theoretical because I was working increasingly interdisciplinarily. And the other change that's happened, I guess, over time has been a shift from work on great but dead white male writers to women writers, dead or alive. And I've done a lot of work on Margaret Atwood as well, and that was from fairly early in my career. Again, I used a fairly traditional approach to Margaret Atwood's work, which in itself changed as I started to become more interdisciplinary. It takes quite a bit of time to develop the methodologies that allow you to work in an interdisciplinary mode as opposed to a traditional, really narrowly defined, disciplinary

mode. But the second *major* author as it were, that I began with in a very early stage in my career was Margaret Atwood. So from Lowry, the dead white male, to the living female. My literary work became contextualized in an interdisciplinary manner.

Then again, recently the shift has taken me away from work with American writers or British writers. I've been focusing more and more specifically on Canadian cultural practice, Canadian cultural phenomena, again interdisciplinary. And in the most recent phase of my career, I've been focusing much more on autobiography and on theatre, and fairly exclusively on women; women autobiographers and women playwrights or theatre practitioners.

ZH: Was there anything that made you decide to study women more, or women writers, or the theatre? Or is it just something that happened by chance?

SG: Probably a lot of things come together, a lot of reading and theory, the fact that a lot of feminist theory has opened up new ways of looking at traditional texts, of teaching and appreciating and reading women's texts. Women's texts are more available, historically, than they were when I was doing my graduate work in the late 60's and early 70's. That's just a practical availability question. And my graduate students, I think, have always been prodding me to move in new directions, and so to keep up with them and the exciting things they're doing, you branch out and you try to catch up with where they are. But I think theory has been an important thing, the sheer availability of texts has been an important thing, and then the third prod for me would be my own graduate students. Less so the undergraduate students, though even there, I've taught WMST 224, the women's literature course. Of course, I did that once fairly early on, and we used Canadian texts. It was an interdisciplinary course; we talked about film, music, theatre, as well as traditional literature. And they pushed me to look at things in new ways. So did the undergraduates to some extent. But Graduate students, theory, and just the sheer availability of material.

ZH: I guess you've sort of answered this, but just to make sure, would you describe your research as feminist?

SG: I would describe everything I do as feminist. It seems to me impossible to be a professional or engaged woman today, and not be, though I wonder about the new chief Justice [laughing], whether she's going to be feminist or not, but I know people would suggest as a civil libertarian she might not be, or Louise Arbour, another eminent legal figure, so it's possible, obviously, to be at the head of a particular profession and not be feminist. But it's not possible for me. I think that being a feminist is part of the air I breathe.

ZH: What are your methodologies? Because this is a feminist research course that I'm taking, that we're asking questions for, so I was just wondering if you have any particular ones?

SG: Feminist methodologies you mean, as opposed to basic research methodologies?

ZH: Well, the methodologies you use in your research, whether they're feminist or not? Because we like to look at all angles.

SG: Well, I'm still, as I said, fairly rooted in fundamental humanist research techniques and methodologies, which would be: one, archival, going right back to the basic materials that you're working with; two, close analysis, what I would call a close reading of those texts; three, then you move out, meaning there are concentric circles and they become wider, larger. So the very, very close focus is the manuscripts or whatever the archived document is, film, whatever. Then the close reading, and then the development of a cultural analysis, around and within which you can situate a particular body of information or a particular oeuvre. Where I would say that my feminist research methodology comes into the perspective, or obvious play, is in the collaborative work that I've done.

I've worked increasingly, since the late eighties, with my graduate students, and I don't mean they just do gopher work for me and bring stuff; yes, of course they do that, but I have presented papers with them, I have co-authored, or co-edited work with them, work that has been published, from articles through to books. Most of them have been women, but not only. I've done this also with a couple of my male graduate students. That kind of collaborative team effort is by no means exclusively something that's feminist or done by women only; for example, in the sciences you've got mostly men working and they've always worked that way. But in the humanities it hasn't been a common practice: a sharing or a pooling, not just of information, but of a final product, so that the person's name is on that paper or on that book. This I consider to be one way in which I can practice, as it were, what I consider to be a kind of feminist research methodology. Specific *feminist* research methodologies tend to arise depending on the topic - so for example, in recent work I've been doing on autobiography, I am *recuperating*, as it were, a 1905 travel writer who actually did an expedition across Labrador. I mean it's almost unimaginable, even today, with the kind of gear that we would have for these kinds of expeditions. And she wrote about it. The context was fascinating because it was in competition with a man, who was doing it at the same time. His reputation has survived and been celebrated; hers has been ignored. It's not surprising. So I'm preparing a whole new edition of that book she wrote after her expedition. And in preparing the edition, I will be using the most traditional humanist methodologies there are, that a man or a woman or a feminist or a non-feminist will use, such as going back to sources, looking at the text, annotating the text. Where the feminist research comes in is in the cultural contextualizing, which will be written up in the introduction to the book, and where I'll be able to use a lot of very interesting theoretical work on autobiography or life writing, and how that is conditioned by gender. And my argument will be that the genre she used is significantly different from male explorers, and it's significantly different in ways that we can access if we are sensitive to feminist analysis of what she's doing.

In terms of the actual practical methodology of working, it's not going to be *feminist*. I'll go to Newfoundland, where the archives are; I'll go to Ontario, where she lived; I'll consult with colleagues, just so happens they tend to be women: a female librarian in Newfoundland, a female historian in Ontario. I have a female research assistant working with me now, but working in a very traditional way. So it's the topic

and the way you situate it culturally, and the theory's crucial here, where I would identify that added value, as it were, of the feminist research or the feminist approach to the subject, which becomes not just added on, but transformative. At least if I do it well, it will be. If I don't do it well then I won't be convincing, but if I do it well I think I should be able to show that by looking at her through a new lens, as it were, one sees something far more interesting, far more complex, far more sensitive. For example the native issues: she was photographing the Naskapi Indians, and doing it quite differently from, I will argue, the rather racist male who was going through Labrador at the same time. So it's the theory that is crucial here in this particular project.

The next big project I'm working on is a biography of a contemporary playwright, who happens to be a woman. Why did I choose her? Because she's a great writer, number one, I wouldn't be tempted otherwise; two, women's position in theatre is even worse than women's position in academia or law or medicine; and somebody needs to do it, if not the definitive study, because the woman is still writing and producing plays (and long may she continue to do so) so it won't be definitive, but it will be, I hope, a major contribution to one of the finest writers in Canada, who's not getting attention otherwise. Why is she not getting attention? Because she's a woman, I think. She's also a particularly demanding, difficult creative genius and that's always hard, but it's not accepted for women to be that way, and it's particularly not accepted in theatre studies.

ZH: Can I ask who that person is?

SG: Sharon Pollock. She'll be here at the end of March, and speaking to the Vancouver Institute. I'm also teaching a grad seminar on Sharon Pollock right now. We don't need to go off into too much about theatre at this point [we laugh], and I certainly don't want to ignore male playwrights who are very, very good as well, but she's, I think, one of the very best senior playwrights with a whole oeuvre to look at. One of the ways in which I'll be looking at her will be archival, so I'll go back to Calgary, where her archives are. A fairly accepted or traditional standard theatre research practice is to visit the theatres and talk to the people who've acted in her plays, to try to get at how she manages what are called proxemics in the theatre, which are very important, the way she uses space. The theatre's different from a written text; it comes alive only in performance.

But beyond that, I'll be looking at the place of the *woman* of theatre in Canadian theatre history. And the problems she faced, why she's faced them, the prejudices, the biases, etc. If you're young and good looking and are an actress, fine, you get the ingenue parts; you get older and the parts become fewer. If you want to direct your plays or your films, hey, you've got problems. Want to be an artistic director? Big time problems. There aren't many women artistic directors anywhere. Why? How many female conductors of orchestras are there? Not many. And I think it's because of the authority and the command that goes with that kind of position. And so Sharon Pollock has faced a lot of these sorts of problems. So through that particular playwright, as well as talking about the wonders of her plays, one gets at the whole question of a woman in the theatre, as an actress, which is what she's done, as a director, as an artistic director, as a producer, as a playwright, to get at the whole cultural complex of theatre.

ZH: I'll be excited to see it. [we laugh]

SG: I'm just in the early stages of this. But I would say in many ways everything I've done to date has been preparing me for this kind of research. [there is a gleam in her eye].

ZH: Great. What kinds of obstacles have you encountered in your career? Have there been any?

SG: Yes, I know there have been. As a Ph.D. student I had one particularly ghastly male Ph.D. committee member, whom I've not been able to forget. He certainly instilled in me, although I wouldn't have articulated it at that time, which was in the early seventies, I didn't have the language to articulate it, but I knew that what happened there should never be allowed to happen with any of my grad students. As Head of the department, I know, it must never be allowed to happen to any graduate students in this department. So rather than replicating that kind of really abusive treatment, my tack has been to have learned that that is exactly the way you don't behave. Now there are many more structures in the university to assist people who end up in that kind of a situation. I had all male teachers; I think there's a question later in your interview about female role models - there were none in my time, I mean we're talking about a number of years ago now [laughs]. Things are better now. I was pregnant with my second child and this man didn't want me in the program. So that was the first instance of discrimination I had, in the context of a lot of support from male professors, I must say, as well. So he was the exception, not the rule.

Here at UBC, in the earlier days in this department, it was a very difficult department for women to be in. The department is a very different department from what it was when I joined it in 1977. I think it's an infinitely better department, for all concerned, because it's not good when you have that kind of an atmosphere. But there are times I look back and wonder how I ever survived those early years. And yes, those kinds of problems include remarks made in a loud voice in a main office, which are totally unprofessional, remarks to do with appearance or calling you Mrs. instead of Dr. or Prof. in a loud voice in front of students. They're little things, not things you can do very much about, but they were very much a part of the ethos of this department. For a female to be promoted, ultimately to Full Professor, meant that she had to have done more and had to be demonstrably better, so that it was harder for people to criticize or find some way of denying the promotion. Again, I think it's changed, but that persisted well into the eighties. I think it's only in the nineties that I'd say that this department has turned around. The natural evolution of people aging, retiring, leaving, and so their influence has left with them. It leaves scars, but it's left.

ZH: How is it being Head of the department?

SG: I have had no trouble whatsoever being Head of this department. I'm the first female head of the English department. The English department is 82 years old now and has always been headed by men, and I have not felt any particular problem. I've had tremendous support from my department. I could not have headed this department 15 years ago. It would have been really, really difficult. But now I don't identify any problems, certainly none that I would relate to gender. I have more men in here [her

office] wanting support than I do my women colleagues [we laugh]. Now, there are more women in the department anyway, but I hadn't anticipated that.

ZH: That's good.

SG: I don't know if it's good or not, because they won't get anything from the system unless they produce. But if support helps them to produce, fine.

ZH: In all the research you've done to date, what do you think is the most useful to anybody? And as a follow-up question, what is the most valuable thing you yourself have learned? Maybe you can talk about those aspects.

SG: Useful is a very tricky word. Useful by what measure? Useful to whom? Is it more useful to society to discover a cure for prostate cancer than it is to edit a collection of plays? Most people would probably say they want the cure for prostate cancer. And in the short run, obviously I would say I want the cure for prostate cancer, the collection of plays can wait. However, if you take a longer term notion of what is useful and if you contextualize it culturally and say, useful to the maintenance of a healthy democracy in which we have genuine democratic processes and equity and cultural understanding, and by cultural understanding I mean a wide wide range - class, gender, sex, ethnicity, race - all of which are interconnected. You don't segregate these, disaggregate them. Then it seems to me that the collection of plays is probably as useful as the cure for prostate cancer, not more useful, no of course not, but it has a different kind of use is what I'm getting at. So it depends on what you see, how you define useful, useful to whom, useful in the short run, useful in the long run, you know.

In terms of my own research what I would say I find most useful are two things. One is this collection of plays, *Staging the North*, which I published and co-edited, and it's one of the things [gets up to grab book from bookcase] - oh it's out in the main hall, I was going to show it to you, oh no I have a copy, it's just recently out - this person [points to a name on the front cover], Eve D'Aeth, is a teacher up at Yukon College in the North - this is about the North, so I worked with somebody actually living and working in the North. So a marginalized region of Canada was integrated into a SSHRC [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada] funded research proposal where I, in a southern university, as the principal investigator who got the money, nonetheless worked in full co-editorship with somebody living and working in the North. So the North is represented, and politically in Canada and culturally and geographically that is one heck of a sore point; the North has always been left out, just as in the early 20th century, the West was always left out. I guess we still feel left out, don't we?

Lisa [Chalykoff] is my Ph.D. student finishing her dissertation right now, and so she gets full and equal billing; we all went to the launch together, we all worked on this together. This is one of these instances of what I consider to be a feminist mode of collaboration, of working together. And it was immensely successful. So I think this book is useful because it has brought plays, many of them hitherto unpublished, contemporary playwrights, very young playwrights, into the public realm so that their work can be read and produced and be made familiar. It brings First Nations writers in, it brings Inuit writers in, it brings Caucasian writers from across the country in, brings gay writers in, so

you know, it's an attempt to be inclusive, to bring new writing to the fore that otherwise is scattered and would never be brought to public attention.

So I think this has been, and will continue to be useful; it's also a book that can be useful on courses because you can teach it. All the royalties go to the playwrights; the editors don't get any of the royalties, so we're in a sense usefully supporting people - I mean you can't live in this country as a playwright, even Sharon Pollock can't. Artists very rarely can live from what they do. The other thing that was the most useful was my two volume collection of Malcolm Lowry's letters; volume one came out in '95, volume two in '96. And again useful because basic archival work has made a body of material available to the scholarly community around the world, and you can't do basic research on Lowry if you don't have his letters because of the nature of the letters, right? (Well you can, but you do it better if you do have them). So, interestingly enough, those two projects are both editing projects, and they're projects that trained a number of graduate students. And they have a very clear utility to students, to future generations, to other scholars, to the field. There's less of me as a personality, I suppose, in these works; they're more, in a sense, work that has been given out to the community. I would consider those to be the two most useful works I've done.

ZH: What about valuable to yourself? Or things that you felt you learned the most from, treasure the most.

SG: Oh, I'm still passionately in love with *Staging the North*. That book was a labour of love, and we had an absolute ball doing it. Three of us; Eve, Lisa and myself. We were all at the book launch last summer, and Lisa's never been at a book launch, never had her name on a book before, it was a first for her, she was on the ceiling. It was a very precious moment for me to see that delight and success and recognition, people asking her for her signature, I mean she was just this high off the floor [motions with hand], it was wonderful. Every research project I've done pretty much I've loved, right, then went on to the next one. So which one have I learned the most from, oh I don't know it's hard to say. If you don't keep learning with each new research project, you might as well give up, pack up and, I don't know, go out and garden, which is also useful [laughs], so no, I can't say. The current project is usually the one I love most. I became extremely exhausted with the Lowry letters. It was ten years, damaged my eyesight, damaged my back, because of the kind of picky slogging work. So I don't have good vibes about that, even though I know I told you that was one that I think is one of my most useful.

The current book which is out now with the publisher called *Canada and the Idea of North*, I've probably enjoyed as much as any of them; I loved the research for that book. It changed my life. I went to the Arctic three times, and I'll go again. My view of the country - the politics and the history of Canada - has just been expanded enormously through the research for this book. As a single-authored book (it's not co-authored or co-edited with other people), I probably learned the most about who I am, about what this country has been, and could be. It takes the history of Canada from 1867 right up to the formation of Nunavut last year. Already last year, it seems hard to believe but yes, April 1st, 1999, when Nunavut was formally declared. And that was a transformative book for me personally.

ZH: We've looked already at your future research plans -they sound very interesting, I'm excited to see that. I guess my final question would be, do you have any advice for any women who would like to do research in the types of areas that you've looked at, or will be looking at?

SG: [Pause] Any particular advice. I don't think so, I mean you work hard. [pauses] I don't think there are any particular hurdles, but we'll see, we'll see. What am I going to find with this Pollock project when I start talking to artistic directors, people in the theatre community? Am I going to find I'm stonewalled by the men? Or that I get negative responses? I don't know. I would anticipate that there might be some of that, given what I consider to be the very sexist construction of theatre, not just in Canada, but anywhere. So that might be something to be aware of, in which case I think - but this is true of anybody - it's important to have a good support team around you. And we're better at doing that now than we were when I was a graduate student.

Certainly this department is better at mentoring, getting a good support team around you. I do wonder whether or not women are a lot more comfortable in the interdisciplinary program (and statistics would seem to imply they are). There's an interdisciplinary program at UBC which is for both M.A. and Ph.D. students, and a significant majority of the people in that program are female. And no studies have ever been made of this that I'm aware of. If they have, I don't know, but I have certainly more than once wondered to myself whether there's something being said there about women not being comfortable in traditional departments, and therefore gravitating to interdisciplinary programs. I could speculate a little bit about that, but that's all it would be, because I don't have any hard evidence to explain why this is the case. But certainly, statistically there are many more women there compared to men. And I'm not sure that it doesn't have something to do with women being very much more comfortable with lateral thinking, with a kind of networking, the organisation of a network that you need to be comfortable with if you're going to work in an interdisciplinary mode, also women (it's not just women, but more women than men) wanting to ask questions about knowledge that lie in the interstices, or at the boundaries of accepted disciplines.

Being less concerned in a kind of obsessive way with getting over the hurdles so they finish and get to the goal, in what I would call a very linear way, not only linear in thinking, but a very linear way of mapping out a career. Women are more interested in crossing back and forward over these boundaries, problematizing these boundaries. Some men will do that as well, of course, and some women will be very good on the linear goal-oriented a-b-c path, obviously, so it's a generalization. But advice that I would have for any graduate student, and certainly for women graduate students, would be, if they were taking English and wanted to branch off into Psychology or whatever, then they should look very seriously at the interdisciplinary graduate program, rather than become too closely identified with a traditional discipline.

ZH: Great.

SG: So mentoring, keeping your options open, but these are basic.

ZH: Wonderful. Have you anything to add before we turn off the tape recorder? [I laugh]

SG: I don't think so.

ZH: No?

SG: No.

ZH: Great. Well, thank you so much.

SG: You're welcome.