

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH LINDA GRANT NIEMANN

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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Wednesday, 9 March 2016
Location: Sturgis Library, Kennesaw State University

TS: Linda, why don't you begin talking about your background? I know you got a bachelor's degree from University of California at Santa Cruz in 1968. I assume you must have grown up in California.

LN: Yes.

TS: It was a BA, so I assume it was in English. Would you talk about growing up in California and what attracted you to the field of English and maybe about your academic background? Also, I gather very early on you were attracted to railroads, so you might talk about that too.

LN: Yes. I'm from Pasadena, California, and I went to just about every campus of the University of California. I started out at Riverside in '64. Then I went up to Santa Cruz in '67. I also took a summer class at UCLA in film. I ended up teaching for a year in Santa Cruz. Then I taught for a year, replacing somebody at UC San Diego. I got a PhD at Berkeley, actually.

TS: Right, so you tried out the whole university system in California.

LN: I did. And it was free then, by the way.

TS: That's right—before Ronald Reagan.

LN: Yes, before our great leader brought in tuition.

TS: He came into office in '67, so that was about the time you were trying to finish up. I guess it took him a year or two to push through a tuition increase. [Editor's note: Ronald Reagan was governor of California from 1967 to 1975. According to the "History of UC Tuition since 1868," *Daily Californian*, December 22, 2014, the University of California originally charged no tuition to in-state students. In 1921 California still charged no tuition for resident students, but instituted an "incremental fee of \$25 a year to cover costs for athletics, health services, and other nonacademic needs. That fee grew modestly to \$84 a year by 1956. In 1968, the second year of the Reagan administration, the state created a registration fee for all students of \$300 a year. It added an additional "educational fee" in 1970 of \$150 a year for undergraduates and \$180 a year for graduate students. While it was not called tuition, it marked symbolically a move away from tuition-free education. By 1975-1976, near the end of the Reagan administration, tuition and fees had grown to \$630 a year for University of California undergraduates.]

LN: Yes, so I had a free ride the whole way.

- TS: We always envied California for its free college education, not that tuition was expensive anyway back in those days. I think when I went to the University of Tennessee it was \$75.00 a quarter.
- LN: Yes. That's one of the things I really liked about Kennesaw [when I came here in 1999] was that it was free. I benefited from that, and I felt that it was really great that it was free here too.
- TS: Or almost free. [Editor's note: According to the 2000-2001 undergraduate catalog, full-time resident (in-state) students in 1999-2000 paid a matriculation fee each semester of \$904, a student services fee of \$131, a technology fee of \$38, a parking fee of \$20, and an additional parking deck fee of \$50 to help pay for the first two decks that were then under construction. Nonresident students paid an additional \$2712 tuition fee. Compared to the higher education costs in most other states, a Kennesaw education was relatively inexpensive.]
- LN: Yes, just about.
- TS: Or you could qualify for a HOPE scholarship and go for free.
- LN: Yes, I really liked that.
- TS: How big was the University of California at Santa Cruz at that time?
- LN: I have no idea; I just don't know. Santa Cruz was small. I was in maybe the second graduating class. There were in trailers. We rented these old Victorian houses, and I think I would pay \$17 a month for a room. So not only was school free, but you could really afford to have a house, and students could go in on a big house. A lot of things were easier. [Editor's note: According to the university website, UCSC opened in 1965 with 652 undergraduate students. In 1966 enrollment grew to 1,267 undergraduates and the first 27 graduate students].
- TS: Why the field of English?
- LN: Well, that's what I've always done. I was writing poetry. I always assumed I would do English, and I did.
- TS: What were your career ambitions at that time—to be a college professor?
- LN: Yes. I saw myself being a college professor. I thought that would be just wonderful.
- TS: In the 1960s were there a number of women in the English Department or very few at Santa Cruz?
- LN: Maybe one I'm thinking, yes, probably one. No, very few.
- TS: It's still a little early isn't it for a lot of female faculty, at least in tenure track positions?
- LN: It was. When I did my orals at Berkeley I think I demanded that I have female faculty members on my committee because I knew they would have to scramble to come up with them. They did and they gave me the worst time!

TS: Well, you went through pretty rapidly. In '68 you got your bachelor's. Then did you take some education courses? You taught, you said, for a year.

LN: No, I didn't. I just went straight through. I got my BA, and then I went immediately to Berkeley and got my PhD.

TS: Oh, you taught at Berkeley?

LN: Yes, I taught at Berkeley as a TA. While I was doing my dissertation, I taught at San Diego for a year replacing somebody.

TS: I believe you received a master's degree in 1972. Did it take you four years to earn your master's, or did they just hand them out on the way to the doctorate?

LN: Yes, at Berkeley it's if you pass your comprehensive exams. I think there was a big offensive in the Vietnam War that was going on at the same time.

TS: By '72 the war was winding down.

LN: Yes. It was a horrendous time. I forget exactly what it was, but it was really awful, and it was going on at the same time that I was writing this three-day comprehensive exam.

TS: Were you wearing beads and hanging out with hippies and all that?

LN: Oh yes, absolutely.

TS: You couldn't do otherwise at Berkeley, could you?

LN: Well, you could, but I hitchhiked a ride one time, and somebody actually threw me out of the car because I wasn't radical enough. I was still in school, and they wanted to know what I was doing in some institution that was part of the military industrial complex.

TS: I guess Berkeley had quite a few contracts with the Defense Department.

LN: Yes, right.

TS: Stanford probably had a lot more in that period. Berkeley would have certainly had their share.

LN: Well, I looked like a hippie, but I stayed in school the whole time. So, of course, I couldn't have been a hippie, actually.

TS: You were aware of what was going on.

LN: Yes, right.

TS: You remember the sixties.

LN: Yes, I do. A miracle. I don't remember my Greek from the sixties.

TS: Your Greek? You studied Greek?

LN: I did.

TS: Why? Were you . . .

LN: I sort of ran out of things to study in the English department that I wanted to study, so I went over and studied Greek.

TS: The only people I know that were studying Greek were going to a theological seminary or studying ancient history or philosophy.

LN: Yes. One of my teachers challenged me to do it, and I did it.

TS: Were you studying Greek mythology?

LN: Well, no, I think he said something about it being . . .

TS: Did you want to read Plato in the original language?

LN: Yes, kind of. So I started studying Greek, and the first sentence that we had to look at was “Men’s souls are immortal.” I thought, that’s a lot better than, “Joe went to the *boulangerie*.” So I thought, well, this is probably going to be cool. It was but I mean . . .

TS: So that became your language for your doctorate?

LN: It did.

TS: Fantastic. I think I would have probably enjoyed Greek more than studying German.

LN: Well, you know, I really wanted to have Spanish be one of my languages, but the English department was not in favor of that, so I had to have French or German.

TS: There weren’t enough Latinos and Latinas in California at that time?

LN: It was prejudiced. I don’t know if that’s changed, but at that time it was considered not to be suitable for literary study. I’d always made a big stink in high school to get my parents to let me go to a public high school for my senior year so I could study Spanish.

TS: Oh, really? You were going to a private school?

LN: Yes, but they didn’t offer Spanish, and I wanted to get out.

TS: What kind of private school did you go to?

TS: Well, it was just a private school that went from grade school to high school right next to Caltech [California Institute of Technology].

TS: Kind of like a Walker School?

LN: Yes, kind of, absolutely.

TS: So you came from a pretty affluent background?

LN: Well, more or less. I would definitely say middle class. My father taught at Caltech, so we were not rich.

TS: What did he teach?

LN: He taught chemistry.

TS: You didn't want to be a chemist?

LN: I just don't have that kind of brain.

TS: I came from a family of engineers, and I obviously did not become an engineer. I understand. Okay, so being part of the academic world was not strange to you.

LN: No, it was absolutely normal.

TS: Well, it was a rough time to grow up, I think, in that era.

LN: Yes. A lot was going on.

TS: So you go straight through and you get your doctorate in '75. What did you do your dissertation on?

LN: Charles Dickens' autobiographical novels ["Dickens' Family Romance: A Study of Identity in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*."]

TS: Okay, so about as far as you can get from what you're doing nowadays.

LN: Actually not.

TS: Really? Okay, tell me what it has in common with your work on the railroads?

LN: Oh, you mean what I did for a living on the railroads?

TS: Well, no, you answer it however you want to. What is it about that dissertation that is still relevant to what you're doing today?

LN: Well, Dickens was a roamer. He roamed around and took notes on what people were doing. So he was really up on every aspect of working life in London. He was a court reporter, so he got it all down. His characters are really right out of working class London.

TS: I guess so. That would make sense.

LN: So it's that world he was looking at. To me the railroad was kind of like the same thing. I guess I recognized the potential immediately in the railroad that there were stories here.

TS: Is that what attracted you to Dickens that he was really writing about working class people?

LN: I think essentially, yes, that was. I've always been interested in that, and his language is fabulous, and he was truly popular, and everything about him, really. I just think he was

an amazing, amazing genius writer. But the true aspects of his work is what appealed to me, not the fictive aspects. The more fictive you got the worse he got. But the reportage aspects of his work was what really interested me.

TS: You knew you wanted to do literary non-fiction at that early date?

LN: No, but I could see that that was what interested me about it.

TS: So had you gone into an academic career straight out of graduate school what would have been your specialty do you think? Nineteenth-century English literature?

LN: Yes, it would have had to be because they forced you into that. I had to specialize in the novel and then the English novel, all of which I've thrown off the train a long time ago.

TS: That might not have kept you in academia forever if that were your field?

LN: No, it was very fortunate that I didn't stay in academia for me.

TS: So '75 you finish your doctorate, but there are four years before you start working on the railroad. What do you do in those four years?

LN: Wine, women and song!

TS: Okay! So you're not working an academic job at all?

LN: No, one year before I finished my PhD I worked at San Diego teaching, and then I just finished my dissertation . . .

TS: You didn't like it?

LN: Well, it was a replacement job, and it wasn't a real job.

TS: But were you attracted to teaching?

LN: Oh sure, I loved it. So I wanted to find a job and I got the PhD, but I didn't find the job.

TS: You found a job, but it was not very good.

LN: It was awful. I was in a wonderful place. After trying for about a year I sort of looked around. My neighbors were playing music, and they were street musicians. I had really not stopped school for all that time, just gone straight through . . .

TS: You wanted a vacation for a while.

LN: Yes. So I picked up my flute and started playing with all these people who were playing in my little court. I got in some bands played music for five years.

TS: So how did you pay the bills back then?

LN: I worked in a gas station and then, you know, the way musicians pay the bills: unemployment [insurance], gas station, playing on the street for sandwiches in front of the delis.

TS: So you go back home, and they say, “When are you going to get a real job?”

LN: Yes, my mother was worried. She was thinking, “Oh, she could become a high school teacher. What is she doing?”

TS: Maybe think about the junior college system out in California.

LN: Yes, I think at that point I really couldn’t have been anything. I was a real street musician.

TS: You were following your muse, I guess.

LN: I was. And I took up photography. I had a dark room, and I was developing pictures of the other musicians, and just doing the arts—dancing.

TS: Were you doing any writing in that period?

TS: No, not too much. I was writing some poetry, and I was just dancing every night as well. It was that kind of a thing.

TS: That’s okay. So what causes you to become a brakeman on the railroad?

LN: Well, I was hanging out with a lot of university people still because those were my friends. Sharon Ladin’s boyfriend, this guy named Bill Finnegan who is now a writer for *The New Yorker*, had got this job on the railroad. He was a brakeman. So he was bragging about the job, and he didn’t appear to be working. I mean, he was surfing every day. So I thought that looks like a pretty easy job.

TS: So did he work at night?

LN: Yes, it turns out.

TS: He never slept; he surfed in the day and worked at night?

LN: A railroad job is a nighttime job for most people. Anyway, he said, “Not everybody could do my job. It’s hard and you have to be brave”—and all this dashing stuff. So I thought, “I can do that.” I called up the railroad, and they said, “Are you calling for your husband?” I said, “No.” They said, “Well, women don’t work on the railroad as brakemen.” So I got turned down. I kept playing music, and there it was in the paper—Jimmy Carter got elected and he started enforcing the Civil Rights act—suddenly there was a big thing in the paper: “Brakemen wanted. Women encouraged to apply.”

TS: Oh, did they really mean it?

LN: Well, yes and no. They had to mean it, but I think they approved people that they thought would never make it.

TS: Oh, they didn’t think you would ever make it because you looked like a hippie.

LN: Yes. I was short. Other people were way overweight . . .

TS: Two hundred pounds?

LN: Yes, they just didn't seem like they were picking people they thought could make it.

TS: Because you have to lift a lot?

LN: Well, you don't really have to lift. Railroad works on levers and wheels, so if you're really . . .

TS: So you've got to be athletic?

LN: You have to be athletic and not accident prone. But if you're a good dancer, you'd be a really good brakeman. And I had been dancing seven nights a week, practically.

TS: Somebody was asking me the other day about whether union seniority and all that really matters on who gets jobs in the railroad.

LN: It's the only thing that matters.

TS: Okay, so you could get an entry level job, and then, of course, you join the union when you get the job, I guess. But you're at the bottom of the pecking order at that point.

LN: Yes.

TS: So that's why to begin with you're doing mainly whenever they call you and not necessarily steady?

LN: Oh, yes, you're on the extra board, what they call the extra board because railroad jobs tend not to have regular days off. If you get sick or need a day off, like say some child is graduating, then you have to lay off and then they call somebody from the extra board to fill your spot. I think all working class jobs want to maximize the amount of money you could possibly make, so they try to maximize the hours of overtime you could possibly have in a week. So if somebody just wants to work all the time . . .

TS: They can't.

LN: Well, they can. The union wants you to be able to work twelve hours a day seven days a week, so that's the way the jobs are set up.

TS: Eighty-four hour work weeks?

LN: Yes. And they want it that way.

TS: The union wants it that way?

LN: Yes. Because then their members can make a lot of money. That's the only way a working person can make money.

TS: If they live a normal life and want to go home to their family, they need a different job.

LN: Yes, they need a different job or else they've got a lot of seniority, and they just bid in a five day a week, forty hour a week job. There are such things, and they work both jobs,

and they go home. But most people on the railroad stay marked up and work around the clock.

TS: Okay, so eighty-four hours a week, but every now and then somebody wants to take off a day.

LN: Yes.

TS: And that's when you get to work?

LN: Yes.

TS: That could get old in a hurry doing twelve hours a day seven days a week. Let's say somebody did work twelve hours a day practically every day. How much money could they make in a year?

LN: A hundred thousand. Back then, twenty-five years ago.

TS: Which would be pretty good back then. We're obviously going through a period of inflation in '79, but still . . . I was trying to think that I was probably making \$17,000 to \$20,000 at that time.

LN: I think the most I ever made staying marked up as much as I possibly could—and I didn't have any seniority, so I would just maybe catch a good run every once in a while—was probably about \$86,000, but still that was probably in '85 or '86.

TS: That's pretty good money.

LN: Well, it was staying marked up.

TS: More than you would have been making at Kennesaw.

LN: Absolutely. I would have to take a huge pay cut to have a better status job.

TS: Something is wrong with that picture it sounds like. But they certainly earn their pay if they're working all those hours.

LN: They certainly do.

TS: How did you get trained for the job? Did they have any training programs for you?

LN: They had a two-week class.

TS: Two weeks?

LN: Yes.

TS: Two weeks was your training then?

LN: Well, it stood me in good stead; it really did. It was a two-week class on the Book of Rules, which was about this thick. A huge book on everything that could go wrong out

there and what you are not allowed to do to prevent whatever happened from happening again.

TS: So anybody that's a brakeman must be pretty literate to read all of that.

LN: No, the old heads have just memorized this stuff, and they cheated through their rules test. They could not read.

TS: Oh, they learned by observing?

LN: Well, they knew how to do the work, and then they could get through the rules test whenever they had to take a refresher. But we were supposed to learn the job, initially, in the two-week class through the Book of Rules. Then, of course, as soon as we got on the job our first foreman said, "Forget all about that Book of Rules. This is how you do it."

TS: Okay, an apprenticeship system sounds as though it would work very well if you could follow somebody around.

LN: That's what you did.

TS: Okay, so you start getting jobs to go to work in Santa Cruz or somewhere, and you watch others, what they're doing, and try to do the same thing. I guess they start you on simple tasks to begin with?

LN: Well, no, you got thrown in. You were an extra brakeman on a local. So you'd just tried to not get run over and followed someone around. You got yelled at all the time, and that's how you learned.

TS: Okay, I don't think I could learn that way.

LN: Well, you're motivated. You are very motivated.

TS: I think I read somewhere in your writings where you pretended like you knew what you were doing.

LN: You are very motivated, I mean, you do not want a limb cut off going to work. So if somebody knows more than you do, you pay attention.

TS: It sounds like the way you describe things that the accident rate must be pretty horrendous on the railroads.

LN: Yes, yes, it was. It's very dangerous. Inherently very dangerous.

TS: But you avoided injury?

LN: I did.

TS: So you could move real fast.

LN: That's right.

TS: Well, you have some interesting stories in *Railroad Noir: The American West at the End of the Twentieth Century* [Indiana University Press 2010] about traveling and staying overnight in hotels that were designated for the railroad workers. Did the companies decide what those hotels were? Did they negotiate with the hotels?

LN: They did, yes.

TS: And so you actually didn't have to register and bring out your credit card and pay for staying? The railroad paid for all that?

LN: Yes.

TS: It sounds like they maybe put you in the seediest places they could find.

LN: Well, railroaders are going to get a place pretty dirty immediately. They're going to walk on the carpet with this diesel stuff on their shoes.

TS: A fancy hotel didn't want you staying there anyway, right?

LN: No! It wouldn't be working.

TS: I read an interview that you did some time back with a railroad man himself, a union man, Joh Flanders.

LN: Oh, yes, he interviewed me.

TS: Co-chair of Railroad Workers United? [Jon Flanders, "An Interview with Linda Niemann, Author of *Boomer, Railroad Memoirs*," *MRZine*, a Project of the Monthly Review Foundation, September 8, 2008].

LN: Yes.

TS: In the interview as well as in *Railroad Noir* you had some interesting things in there I thought about things you had to overcome like sexism on the job. I guess it went with the territory. And the pornography that you had to put up with as well when there weren't very many women.

LN: Yes, that's right.

TS: Are these the guys that are voting for Donald Trump right now?

LN: They probably are. They're just chickens voting for Colonel Sanders. What can I say?

TS: Well, they sound like a pretty rough crew although it sounded like you had a certain amount of affection for them at the same time.

LN: Yes. Well, you know, working with people where your life is in their hands, you have to get along with them. Then you do depend on them, and then you have that bond that you have depended on them and you've come through for them.

TS: I think you said something to the effect that you doubted that you had changed anybody's opinion about anything.

LN: Oh, yes. Absolutely not!

TS: But you gained respect by doing your job.

LN: I was an academic, and so I thought ideas were the most important things, and ideas were what changed the world.

TS: Of course [laughs].

LN: Yes. And now I think it is numbers. I think there's something about the critical mass or the numbers of representations, just, when the norm changes then ideas follow along behind.

TS: Oh, I see. If enough women are working on the job the ideas change.

LN: Yes.

TS: That makes sense.

LN: It kind of does actually [laughs].

TS: Because it is in people's self-interest to get along.

LN: Yes, right.

TS: So you've become more cynical about the power of the pen.

LN: Yes, although the pen is powerful. But ideas just floating in academe without some real hook up to action don't even reach most people in any way. That's why I've pretty much wanted to do a different kind of writing, not an academic one. When I came back to the university and was looking for jobs again, I only advertised myself as creative non-fiction because that's the type of writing I realize I absolutely wanted to do.

TS: Right, so your audience is not five people in academia who might understand what you have to say but a general audience?

LN: Yes, hopefully.

TS: Well, I think that's fabulous, personally. That's what I've always tried to do. I think maybe it is the mission of a place like Kennesaw State to be more interested in reaching out and having some impact on society as opposed to writing the next great book that only five people will ever understand in the field of English or history.

LN: I presented at this conference, which is this very strange group of people. It's called the Lexington Group in Transportation History, and the organization is over seventy years old [founded by Richard C. Overton of Northwestern University and other railroad historians in 1942, according to the group's website]. It brings together railroad academics and railroad management, that unholy alliance [laughs].

TS: No workers there.

LN: Yes. So I read a story about one-person crews and how dangerous they are. That story had been nixed by *Trains* magazine that has been publishing my work when it was much more about my life on the railroad.

TS: Oh, too political?

LN: Yes. They said the railroad won't like this.

TS: Oh, and they cared what the railroads thought?

LN: Yes, and I basically said, "Man, cowboy up!"

TS: One-person crews sound ridiculous.

LN: Well, it is happening. That is what took out that town in Canada, but anyway, yes. I read this to this group, and half of the people in there would not speak to me for the rest of the conference.

TS: And they were the management?

LN: Yes! They would get on an elevator with me and would look at their thousand dollar loafers on their way up to the penthouse!

TS: They're doing this obviously to save money.

LN: Well they are attending the conference to get a good press from these academic historians by giving them free train rides. I mean, we had boondoggles at this conference you wouldn't believe.

TS: Oh, I understand. I mean the one-man crews are to save money.

LN: Oh, yes, absolutely!

TS: I gather computerization is changing things, supposedly.

LN: Well, yes, supposedly. I mean there's no crew at the rear anymore.

TS: No caboose?

LN: Right. But that was people back there. Now there's just one person up there they want. One person. There's no sensory input on these long hauls. You're in the middle of nowhere, it's dark, and you have no sensory input.

TS: Oh, all by yourself?

LN: Yes, all by yourself, and now with an inward facing camera watching you. How nice [laughs]!

TS: Well, there's no caboose anymore, so where would you be sitting?

LN: Well it's just the engineer.

TS: The engineer is the crew?

LN: Yes, or in the yard it's the switchman with a rather bulky device, a [remote-controlled] belt pack that controls the engine. Part of my article was about this guy who got coupled up working alone as a switchman controlling the engine with a belt pack. He needed to change out one of the coupling devices. He asked for help from the maintenance of way people and they said, "No, we're too busy. Go do it yourself." He's in a big switching yard with all these tracks and lots of stuff going on. He was changing out the coupler himself and got crushed. I only found out about it because I'm in touch with this kind of wildcat Internet organization that's a union for all railroad workers.

TS: I think you mentioned that in that article.

LN: Yes, Railroad Workers United. They put me on to this story and then . . .

TS: So you did your paper, and they didn't appreciate it.

LN: Well they really didn't appreciate it. Somebody said, "Madam, have you ever worked on a one-person crew?" And I said, "Thank God, no!" He said, "Well, that's all I have to say." What could I say? Have you?" The most unlikely scenario. But I had been a switchman for twenty years.

TS: You said half of the people didn't like what you said. Did the academics like it?

LN: Yes, I had people coming up and surreptitiously patting me on the back. Then that article won a national award after it was refused by *Trains* magazine.

TS: Oh, where was it published?

LN: It was published in their rival magazine, *Railfan and Railroad*.

TS: And it won a national award from whom?

LN: From *Railroad History* [Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.]. Most people were there at the conference. What a slap in the face to *Train*. They will never publish me again!

TS: Or invite you to a conference and give you a free ride on the rails.

LN: No, I am a member, so I can always go to that conference.

TS: We've got a member in the history department now that we've merged with Southern Poly who's written about railroads; have you met him?

LN: No.

TS: Albert Churella. He was on the faculty at Southern Poly before the consolidation, and he has written about the Pennsylvania Railroad [*The Pennsylvania Railroad*, vol. 1, *Building an Empire, 1846-1917* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013)]. He has also written

about railroad management history [*Steam to Diesel: Managerial Customs and Organizational Capabilities in the Twentieth-Century American Locomotive Industry* (Princeton University Press, 1998)].

LN: Right.

TS: That might be somebody you'd be interested in.

LN: Yes.

TS: Okay, well, you work on the railroads for twenty years. We probably don't need to talk a whole lot more about it because you've written all these books, but while you were still working on the railroads it looks like your first books started coming out: *On the Rails: A Woman's Memoir*, which I guess is your first-hand experience. That was in '97 by a press I haven't heard of before, Cleis Press?

LN: Yes. Well, actually that was a retitling of *Boomer*. I had no control over the title. I hated that title.

TS: You liked *Boomer* better.

LN: Yes. It's a natural thing. *On the Rails* was their idea of something that would sell.

TS: So when did *Boomer* come out?

LN: In 1990. I had been working on the railroad about eleven years when it came out.

TS: Okay, so when Indiana University Press published *Boomer* in 2011 was that another reprint?

LN: Yes. So it's still in print from 1990 to now. That's pretty good.

TS: Well, you need to do an e-book of it.

LN: Yes, I will actually. I didn't even know there wasn't one.

TS: I've gotten to where I like to read e-books. It's almost like reading a regular book.

LN: I guess, I don't know, I've never done it.

TS: The thing about it in terms of impulse purchases—you want it and it's there immediately.

LN: That's true.

TS: Okay, that would have been your first book in 1990, and you'd been working about eleven years at that time.

LN: I hired on in '79.

TS: So who published that one originally?

LN: University of California.

TS: Oh, did they? Did you have any problems getting them to accept the book?

LN: I didn't submit it to them. They got it because a friend of mine in New York was reading my manuscript. He got in an elevator in this building and ran into a friend of his. This guy was connected with some press. He handed it off to him, and that guy send it to his friend at University of California Press, and they called me. It was like a hand-off in an elevator.

TS: Of course, that's where you got your degree.

LN: Yes. And it was about California.

TS: What kind of reaction was there after the book came out?

LN: I had the most reaction to *Boomer* mainly because it wasn't an art book. My next books were art books. They're wonderful, but they don't get attention for the writing. So *Boomer* got a lot of attention in that it was on the Bay Area

TS: But no pictures in this one.

LN: No pictures!

TS: You have to read!

LN: Yes. So it got attention as a literary thing, and it won an award in California. The Bay Area Book Reviewers gave it a win, which was sweet for me because I beat out North Point Press, and they'd refused to publish *Boomer*. I was trying to get them to publish it.

TS: So they rued the day that they turned you down?

LN: Well, no they didn't steam about it [laughs]. And they actually ended up publishing me first, which they didn't even know about because this guy Lenny [Leonard] Michaels was doing an anthology. He was a friend of my thesis director, and I gave them an early chapter of *Boomer*, and he published it. That was the first publication of the material for *Boomer* by North Point Press. The title was *West of the West: Imagining California* (1989).

TS: And despite that they didn't want to publish it. Did they give you any reason?

LN: No, but somebody told me that this guy had recently gotten divorced, and I was like his ex-wife or something. It can be something like that.

TS: You reminded him of his ex-wife?

LN: Yes. It can be something like that.

TS: So no rational explanation like we don't think this will sell any copies.

LN: He said something like he thought that the experiences were better than my telling the experiences.

TS: He didn't think you wrote very well?

LN: Right.

TS: Well, phooey on him. University of California Press printed you. The Bay Area Book Reviewers liked it.

LN: Yes. We got the win. Over Gary Snyder.

TS: Who is Gary Snyder?

LN: Oh, just a famous poet in California. [Editor's note: Snyder was born in San Francisco in 1930. He is a professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Davis. His book of poems and essays, *Turtle Island* (1974), received a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Another book of poetry, *Axe Handles* (1983), won an American Book Award. In 2012 the Academy of American Poets gave Snyder a Wallace Stevens Award for lifetime achievement.]

TS: I see, so you beat out a poet.

LN: Yes.

TS: Well, it's maybe a different kind of book than they had ever heard of.

LN: Yes, oh, absolutely.

TS: What does the term "boomer" mean?

LN: A boomer is somebody who follows the work, like the oil booms. I think it comes from that era where people just were wildcatting around at the next strike or the next boomtown. A gold rush town is a boomtown, and then the boomers show up to work in the boomtown.

TS: Oh, I see. And you talk in *Railroad Noir* about going to Houston. I guess it was a boomtown from the oil industry, and the railroads were booming as well.

LN: Yes.

TS: Okay, so you were a boomer that went where the work was. Did your seniority go with you as a union member wherever you went?

LN: It went from El Paso, Texas, to Eugene, Oregon. We had system seniority. They don't have anything like that anymore, but the Southern Pacific had it.

TS: But Houston, wasn't it in a right-to-work state?

LN: Yes, well it was a different seniority system. I had to just go at the bottom in Houston. I was a loner.

TS: Okay. So you did that book in 1990 and then it was reprinted as *On the Rails* in '97. For *Boomer, Railroad Memoirs*, did you do oral histories, more or less, or interviewed people?

- LN: I did. I ended up taking a tape recorder with me because I was very conscious that we were the first women hired ever, practically, other than World War II on a desperation basis in this operating craft.
- TS: You were like Rosie the Riveter, I guess.
- LN: Absolutely, I was. So I interviewed every other woman I met, and I still have those. They're in my office. But I've mined them over the years for *Railroad Voices*, and there are a few things in *Railroad Noir*.
- TS: Okay, so the first one is other people's stories more or less with yours tied in, obviously.
- LN: Well, *Boomer* was my story mostly, and *Railroad Voices* is a lot of other people's stories and my stories.
- TS: Okay, so *Railroad Voices: Narratives by Linda Niemann* is in 1998 by Stanford University Press. And *Boomer* was 1990 by University of California Press and then reprinted in 1997 by Cleis Press and then reprinted again by Indiana University Press in 2011. And *Railroad Voices* in '98 was with photos as well.
- LN: Yes, that was with photos by Lina Bertucci who was a switchman. She was also a pioneer. She hired on about the same time I did on the Milwaukee Road [Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad]. She is not a writer; she's a photographer. When she got on the railroad, she took her camera, and she started taking portraits—all these amazing black and white portraits.
- TS: I bet that was fabulous.
- LN: She had read *Boomer*, and she wrote me and said, "Hey, I've got all these portraits. Let's team up." I took one look at them, and I thought, "Yeah! Let's team up." That was the second book. I did the narratives, and she did the photographs. She'd already done her work, so I could sort of shape the book. I shaped the book myself because I was doing the connecting narratives, and I also selected the photographs. She just sent me 168 photographs, contact sheets and then prints. I took them over to Stanford, and at that time their editorial board was very into photography. The editor they assigned to me was an expert in coloration of photographs.
- TS: But these are black and whites.
- LN: Yes, but they were really into fine art photography. All I'm saying is the editor had a real eye for photography. So we got together. Lina was in New York. She just sent me these pictures. That's all she wanted to have to do with this.
- TS: So whatever you do with them at that point she doesn't care.
- LN: Yes. So Pamela Holoway and I got a big room. We took these 168 photographs, and we just strewed them out all on the floor. We walked around, and we started eliminating. Pretty soon we had a bunch, and then we just started sequencing and eliminating until we had a photographic narrative. We had the shape of the book narratively already in mind, so we then could select the photographs that had a similar shape, but not to illustrate.

TS: So in *Railroad Voices* you're telling somebody's story, and the photograph may not be that person, but a representative of that type of a person?

LN: Or it'll have a narrative shape that's very similar to the narrative shape that's going along with the words. It was interesting.

TS: What do you think the market is for a book like that? Are railroad people buying the book or art lovers that are buying it?

LN: Well, it's a rare book now. It's out of print, and you find it in the photography section. I've been invited to photography conferences of railroad photographers along with academics who write the railroad history. I think the major focus for people is railroad photography, and that is the longest history. Most artists are involved in this because the only access civilians have to the railroad is through photography. That's it. That's where you're going to find the most interesting stuff. Those are the people that bought this book.

TS: Maybe I should ask, if you're working steady at this point and putting in all those hours, you must have been super disciplined to find time to actually write these books.

LN: Yes, well, you don't work steady on the railroad with my seniority. Every winter I'd be laid off.

TS: Oh that's right; you were talking about being the junior member almost all the way through your career.

LN: I absolutely was. I worked the worst jobs for twenty years.

TS: So, see, if you had stayed there now you'd be working the plush jobs.

LN: Oh yes, no, the jobs have suffered attrition as well. I've followed this. The person who is one number above me in California is working the midnight run which is at a cement plant.

TS: So you would never have been able to get a plush job.

LN: That's correct.

TS: Does anybody ever try to attract you into management?

LN: Never.

TS: Despite all your education?

LN: Tom, really, honestly, do I strike you as a managerial type?

TS: Well, maybe not, but somebody along the way should have said, "She's got a lot of smarts."

LN: Well, I hid my degree. I did not mention it.

TS: Oh, so nobody knew that?

LN: No.

TS: They didn't?

LN: No.

TS: Nobody ever found out?

LN: No. Well, they're not big researchers. They barely read, so, yes, it was a big secret. They probably wouldn't have given me the job.

TS: Oh, you would have been overeducated.

LN: Yes.

TS: What did you tell them when you applied?

LN: Oh, some college I said, which is true.

TS: Well, yes, you had some college.

LN: I did.

TS: And they didn't ask any more than that? Nobody checked your references or credentials? Or you didn't have to have references?

LN: Not really; you're arrest record is what they're concerned about. Have you been arrested for a felony? That's your references.

TS: Okay, so assuming that you haven't been arrested for a felony, then you were eligible for the job.

LN: Yes.

TS: That's really weird that that's how you started out. Welcome to the world of people that don't have a high school degree, I guess.

LN: I think you needed a high school degree.

TS: And then some college was a bonus?

LN: I might have even said I graduated from college. That was okay.

TS: Graduated years ago. And had been dancing since then.

LN: Well, that was true.

TS: Okay, so it's on the days that you're not working that you try to write.

LN: Well, there are months and months. You got laid off at the end of harvest season in November, and then you got called back for the beets in the spring. Then you collected unemployment in the winter. That's the railroad life.

TS: So you were part of that 47 percent that [2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt] Romney talked about that was living off the government.

LN: Well, nobody would hire you if they knew you were going back to the railroad the minute they called.

TS: So you couldn't get a job anywhere else?

LN: Well, I mean, "Yes, I'd love to come to work for you until they call me back."

TS: So you drew unemployment. Well, good for the New Deal, I guess, that we have programs like that. Actually it's a government subsidy for the railroads when you look at it from that perspective.

LN: Well, we don't pay into Social Security. We pay into Railroad Retirement. It's a parallel system.

TS: I guess I've seen that on the tax forms about Railroad Retirement. Okay, so at twenty years did you have enough time to draw a retirement pension?

LN: I'm drawing it as we speak. Right this very second I'm drawing it.

TS: That's great! Double dippers from the military draw retirement with twenty years and go to work at another job. You could afford one of these lesser paying jobs.

LN: Yes, I've only been drawing it for a few years. Thanks to Ronald, I had to wait until sixty-seven.

TS: Oh, you had to wait until you were sixty-seven?

LN: Yes.

TS: Thanks to Ronald?

LN: Ronald Reagan. He kept pushing up retirement age.

TS: Oh, okay, yes. Well, I was doing the math. I graduated from college in '64 but I graduated in three years, so I guess you're really three years behind me. I admire you for still working full time.

LN: Well, I'm still liking it. I was writing a book, and it just seemed like too much to think about. I can only really think about one thing at once, especially something like [retirement].

TS: So you had those months then that you could be writing, and you were doing some magazine articles too even before your books came out.

LN: Yes

TS: So those railroad magazines . . .

LN: Well railroad magazines I only started after I came here.

TS: I see. So what kind of magazines would you have been publishing in?

LN: I was trying to do tourist magazine. I had an article in *Nevada Magazine* and just trying to do work like that. But my stuff was really not [what they wanted]. They would say, “This is a family audience.” It was too dark. I mean, I’m not going to sell magazines. Come on [laughs].

TS: So you almost need an academic or literary magazine.

LN: Yes, I’m not a commercial person. I didn’t grow up in a family that even had that gene. I never had it, and so I don’t have it.

TS: Did you try to get your stories into literary magazines?

LN: Well, no I was trying to do commercial magazines, the regional things.

TS: So the tourist magazines.

LN: Yes, the tourists.

TS: Okay. Although after they read what you have to say, they might say, “I don’t ever want to go to that place.” Although I guess you do describe the beauty of nature and those kinds of things that might cause somebody to go to some isolated place out in the desert.

LN: Well, yes.

TS: That’s good. Okay, I guess what I was leading to with all of this is by ’99 I gathered from what I was reading in *Railroad Noir* that you were involved in some kind of accident toward the end of your twenty years that you may or may not have been totally responsible for.

LN: Oh, I was.

TS: You were, okay. I guess it sounded like some other people were giving you a hard time that may have contributed to it.

LN: Well, I don’t know. Any accident is always shared responsibility on the railroad. It was just that . . .

TS: What did you do?

LN: I just put some cars on the ground in the yard.

TS: Okay, and they ran off the track.

LN: No big deal.

TS: You switched them the wrong way.

LN: Yes. I backed them up through a switch that wasn't properly lined and put some cars on the ground.

TS: So a few cars ran off the track; they went around the curve too fast or something?

LN: In the old days of railroading, this is like, "Okay, we stick them back on, and we go about our work." But the Union Pacific had just taken over, and they were set to fire a lot of the workforce. They were starting some draconian points policy of discipline, so they were cracking down on everyone. They wanted to have you one mistake away from being fired at all times. That was their goal.

TS: Okay. And I gather it was even harder for women. I mean it sounded like some of those guys still hadn't gotten used to a woman on the job.

LN: Oh, well, it was just sort of a perfect storm situation. I was recovering from cancer, and that was what I was doing in the yard because I needed to sleep nights to recover. So this was the only place that had no midnight shift within driving distance of where I lived. That's what I was doing, and I called it the hospital yard in later stories. But everybody that was there was there because there was something wrong with them.

TS: They couldn't work at night.

LN: Yes. Or didn't want to work at night.

TS: Or didn't want to. Okay, so you're in the hospital yard.

LN: I'm in the hospital yard and the yardmaster is a complete misogynistic, disgruntled, difficult person.

TS: Who shall remain unnamed!

LN: Yes, well, except I wrote a story about him and published it in *Trains* magazine.

TS: With his name?

LN: Yes, with his nickname.

TS: Did you get sued?

LN: No, because it was his nickname, his railroad name.

TS: And he didn't read it anyway, so . . .

LN: Well, he did read because, of course, my fellow rails put the article on his desk after I'd left when it came out, so he was sure to see it. So when I say the pen is not powerful, it actually is.

TS: I can guess his reaction, but he didn't sue?

LN: Well, he couldn't sue because I was on the left side of the line.

TS: Okay, so a nickname is okay as long as you don't name the name?

LN: Yes. It wasn't his name. And I didn't say anything to invade his privacy or that was libelous.

TS: Okay.

LN: I can have an opinion about someone.

TS: There was a question in the Jon Flanders interview about whether anyone you wrote about had a reaction to what you said. That would be one example of a reaction.

LN: Oh, yes.

TS: Okay, so he blows his top, but you're long gone.

LN: Yes, I'm long gone, and he blew his top in print to *Trains* magazine. It caused me to revise what I had written about him for *Railroad Noir* because I realized I got some bad information. I was a sloppy researcher and actually some of the things people had said as their opinions was in fact not true. I would never have written it if I had known that they were not true.

TS: Okay, so he responds in writing and says this isn't true, and you believe him?

LN: Yes. Sure. I took the word of someone I later found out was a drunk. Who knew? That's why you're supposed to get three sources.

TS: At least two.

LN: At least two. But I said it as "railroad gossip had it that." We know gossip isn't true.

TS: Yes, although it can damage your reputation.

LN: Right. But it wasn't any of the absolute things you cannot say about somebody even if they are true.

TS: Yes, but you felt bad about it if you said something that wasn't true . . .

LN: It's like Mark Twain and *Life on the Mississippi* when he made fun of that steamboat captain and then ran into him on the street and felt like he was two inches tall. Cheap shot. However, he did abuse what power he had over me when he was sitting in a powerful seat.

TS: I understand. So did you get fired or did you just decide it was time to go?

LN: No, I did not get fired. I did not even get too many points, actually because of some miracle I pulled off with the help of some black magic from Mexico. But that's another story, which I wrote in *Railroad Noir*. I had a story about the investigation and the aid of the Otomi bark paper cut out [laughs]. It somehow passed a cloud over the eyes of the people who were running the investigation, and they somehow couldn't remember what

they were doing. It was amazingly miraculous. Someone from the union said, “That was the shortest investigation I’ve ever been to.” I said, “Well, it’s the bark paper working!”

TS: Okay, you keep your job, but by this time was it not as much fun as it was twenty years before, or had you had every experience you wanted to have, or what happened?

LN: My second book got published, and then that was the magic number to get some bites on applications for teaching jobs that I had been pursuing for years.

TS: Oh, you had continued to apply for teaching jobs?

LN: Yes.

TS: Okay, so that second book is really important to come to Kennesaw.

LN: Yes.

TS: How did you find out about Kennesaw?

LN: Well, it was the Association of Writers & Writing Programs’ job list.

TS: So it just popped up there?

LN: Yes, but I was looking. I joined the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), and I got their job lists.

TS: And so the next thing is you have to figure out where is Georgia?

LN: Yes.

TS: You had never been east of Houston at that time, had you?

LN: Is there an east of Houston? Well, I guess there is. Are we east?

TS: I think so [laughs]. The East Coast is east of Houston.

LN: Yes, I had been to the East Coast because my mother’s family was from Buffalo, New York.

TS: Oh, really? My wife is originally from Buffalo.

LN: I had been dragged out there to see the relatives in Buffalo.

TS: Hopefully in the summertime.

LN: Yes. But I knew what it was like in the winter. And I had been to Missouri because my father’s family was from Missouri, so I knew a little bit about it, but not much.

TS: So your knowledge of the east is Missouri and Buffalo.

LN: That’s right!

TS: Okay. So Georgia was an exotic place, I guess.

LN: It was, yes.

TS: And you've got a nice story about travelling in an automobile to Georgia. Okay, so you applied, and I guess they called you up. What did you do—an interview over the phone first?

LN: No, I think it was MLA [Modern Language Association]. The English Department was still funded to go to the MLA at that point.

TS: Who was your first contact at Kennesaw?

LN: It was Laura [S.] Dabundo and [Robert W.] Bob Hill.

TS: They must have been impressed.

LN: Well, I hope so; yes, they were.

TS: Kennesaw at that time would have been a university for three years [since 1996], so we were just learning what it meant to be a university. Did you get invited then for an interview on campus?

LN: Yes.

TS: Did you come for one of these two or three day interviews?

LN: Yes.

TS: And they paid for your airfare to get here, I guess.

LN: They did. It was raining. I was flying in, and I thought, "This is a swamp! Look, it's just like trees and swamp."

TS: This would have been a January or February interview?

LN: February I think.

TS: So colder than California.

LN: Cold, yes, very cold.

TS: Houston can get cold.

LN: Houston can be unbelievably cold.

TS: So you knew about cold weather, but you came in on a rainy February day. What was your first impression of Kennesaw?

LN: Well, I liked it. I really did. Jo Allen Bradham took me out for catfish. That was great. I read the gayest thing I had written just to be sure it was going to be okay here. Nobody blinked an eye, so I thought, "Okay." I just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to get murdered here. I decided I better talk about it up front.

TS: And nobody shot you.

LN: No!

TS: I was thinking maybe in personality you and Jo Allen were about as far apart as two people can be.

LN: We both love Tennessee Williams. He's my favorite writer.

TS: You weren't that far apart then. She did some wonderful things when she first came to Kennesaw with a biography series that we had here. She was inviting all kinds of really first-rate authors, historians included, who came out here and spoke at a time when we weren't doing a whole lot of those kinds of things. I've always liked her. Okay, she took you for catfish, and you decided it wasn't too bad then.

LN: Yes, and I read everybody's books in the MAPW [Master of Arts in Professional Writing] program. I liked all their work, and I liked my colleagues a lot.

TS: Was Tony Grooms here by that time?

LN: It was Tony and Greg Johnson and Jo Allen.

TS: I've done interviews with all of them over the years.

LN: And [Donald D.] "Don" Russ.

TS: Good group.

LN: It was a great group, yes.

TS: Not a group that would have been offended by your topic that day. Okay, in 1999 you get a job at Kennesaw. You're in the academic world again after a twenty-four year delay. So you move all your things to Marietta. I was reading a nice story—I had heard it before from you, I think—about finding a house next to the railroad tracks. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

LN: It was the first house I looked at, and it ended up being the house I bought. I house hunted for three weeks. I had to get going. I looked all over Atlanta too.

TS: Well, that's something that you actually moved to Marietta. I know that a lot of people that come from California would want to live in Atlanta and just commute out this way.

LN: I don't like commuting, and I don't believe in it, really. I wasn't going to commute again. I commuted over the hill to work in San Jose from Santa Cruz, and I was never going to do it again.

TS: How old is your house? You described it as Victorian, but it doesn't go back that far does it.

LN: Nineteen ten.

TS: Is it that old?

LN: I think so, yes.

TS: Well, great, it's over 100 years old then. So you back up to the railroad, so you hear all those trains going by.

LN: I do. Fifty-two trains a day go past.

TS: Well, I live on the railroad tracks too. I'm a little further away than you are, but I can see the trains. I love to go out my front door and look at the trains going by, and our animals have adjusted. The first time we moved in and a train went by, we had a cat that went ten feet up in the air. But still it's nice to live next to a railroad track. Okay, so you buy your house and settle here. Talk about what your position was at Kennesaw, what you were teaching and so on.

LN: Well, they brought me out here to be in the master's in professional writing program, and they wanted to add creative non-fiction as a genre. They didn't really know what it was, so I was supposed to develop both undergrad and graduate classes.

TS: When you say they didn't know what it was, what is there about it that they wouldn't have known?

LN: Well, it's only been recently admitted into creative writing. For a long time creative writing . . .

TS: Oh, non-fiction would not be called creative writing?

LN: Right. It would be called essays or personal essays. So a lot of MFA programs are fiction and poetry, but now they're adding creative non-fiction, and it's called the fourth genre. I wonder what the third one is. Playwriting maybe. Anyway, I had to find out what it was that I was doing because I was just writing it. I'd never studied it. So I had to do all that.

TS: You'd never studied it because there wasn't such a thing, I guess, when you went through Berkeley.

LN: I never studied creative writing ever. I mean, I taught classes in poetry writing because I was writing poetry, and I'd been in the poetry group. I'd studied poetry as literature, but I'd never taken a creative writing class in my life, actually.

TS: You just did it.

LN: I did it.

TS: Well, they must have had some concept or they wouldn't have been hiring somebody for this position.

LN: Yes. Well, they knew it was a genre that was being added to creative writing programs. So if you were going to have a creative writing program, you want to find somebody who can do this new genre.

TS: Right. I was thinking of Tony Grooms. It may be fiction, but there is usually a story that actually happened behind what he writes in novels such as *Bombingham*. He had all those stories that he heard from his wife's family in Birmingham, I would say it's kind of a fine line between creative fiction and creative non-fiction unless you're just totally making stories up out of the blue.

LN: Yes, it is a fine line. It's an interesting line. Sometimes in my classes we read things that are fiction that are so very close that you get to talk about how close they are.

TS: So you developed some courses that we never taught before obviously at Kennesaw and maybe cutting edge in a lot of places at that time.

LN: Yes.

TS: Did you also teach a western literature course?

LN: I did. I taught World Lit. I started out teaching comp, just tons of composition classes.

TS: Yes, back in '99 we were still doing that.

LN: Yes. And I loved that then actually. I loved teaching comp because again I hadn't been taught how to teach comp. So I got to make that up. It was just writing as far as I was concerned, so I had fun with it. Then I started teaching World Lit. I had a great mentor in Dede Yow. She was my mentor in World Lit. She was assigned to me by Laura Dabundo who didn't see how a switchman could possibly come here and start teaching.

TS: Oh, really?

LN: There was some truth to that. I wasn't used to it at all at that point. So Dede got me through how do you do this. We taught essentially the same World Lit class for a while. We didn't teach together, but we did the same syllabus.

TS: I see. Okay. You know Dede did a lot of these interviews with me before she retired.

LN: Yes.

TS: In fact, she's in my Sunday school class now, so I see her about once a week. We were on the semester system by the time you go here. So were you teaching three classes a semester?

LN: At least, I think. It seems like I was teaching a ton of comp classes in addition to . . .

TS: And I guess they expected you to continue to write as well.

LN: Yes.

TS: Not to mention doing a ton of service at the same time.

LN: Yes, yes.

TS: So you're doing it all at that point. Is this when you start writing for the railroad magazines?

LN: Yes.

TS: It's 2010 before your next book comes out, so you were here eleven years before your next book came out, but your scholarship is publishing in the railroad magazines?

LN: Right.

TS: Even though they aren't academic publications, were they rewarded at Kennesaw? Was that what they wanted you to do?

LN: Yes. It was creative non-fiction. Those are the stories that ended up being *Railroad Noir*. So it was just in a way serially getting them done, and then the added benefit was that they were published and I was paid.

TS: Oh! That's a good perk!

LN: Yes. It was kind of win-win-win.

TS: Okay. And I guess the rules are different in an area like the MAPW program of where you would expect to get something published. If you're doing creative writing you're not doing it for an academic audience; you're doing it for a literary audience.

LN: Most people who publish academically in creative writing might go for small literary magazines. That's where they publish. Those types of magazines I'd never had much luck with publishing my railroad material because they're kind of classist in a certain way.

TS: Oh, don't care about workers?

LN: Right.

TS: So publishing in a railroad magazine is better?

LN: It's better.

TS: Okay, and they pay.

LN: And they had 180,000 circulation.

TS: Oh my goodness.

LN: So it built up quite an audience for a book publication.

TS: What's the leading journal?

LN: It was *Trains* magazine.

TS: Okay, so that's kind of like *History Today* or something like that.

LN: I published in *Railroad History* and *Trains* magazine and *Railroad Heritage* also. Some of these are much more academic, like *Railroad History* is very academic.

TS: But *Railroad Heritage* would be for preservation folks, I guess.

LN: Yes. And *Trains* is much more popular. They have this huge circulation and the money. I had it so lucky with an editor there. I had Mark [W.] Hemphill as an editor, and he was literary, and so he sheltered me. A lot of these stories are very edgy, even for an academic publisher, and Mark just went right ahead. I'd get this e-mail where he said, "This is going to get me fired, but . . .".

TS: But apparently you didn't get him fired.

LN: Well, he left. I don't know that he was fired. He then went to Iraq and he was helping rebuild the railroads in Iraq after Desert Storm or something.

TS: After they blew them all up?

LN: Yes. I forget what he's doing now, but he's doing some sort of high-level thing. For a while though he was the editor of *Trains* magazine, and he was indispensable. [Editor's note: According to Wikipedia, he was editor of *Trains* from September 2000 to July 2004. From 2005 to 2007 he worked with a U.S. State Department agency as senior consultant to the director general of the Iraqi Republic Railways Company, helping to rebuild the national rail system. After that, he was director of railroad consulting services for an engineering firm.]

TS: Did you get a lot of audience reaction?

LN: Yes, I got lots and lots of letters. *Trains* got tons of mail from my articles, tons.

TS: Edgy stuff probably provoked reactions from both sides.

LN: Almost overwhelmingly positive.

TS: Really?

LN: Yes, I don't think there was anything that was negative really.

TS: So folks who don't want to hear edgy stories about workers didn't read the story.

LN: Well, management folks are really rail buffs at heart. The money is in management, and they consider the prestige. I think the brakeman has the most prestige, but they might think that a manager has more prestige. Ultimately, they'll want to read about brakemen as well.

TS: Okay. So at any rate you published a ton of articles in *Trains* and similar magazines. About how many a year would you publish?

LN: Well, maybe one or two.

TS: So a steady stream for the next ten or eleven years, and then *Railroad Noir* came out in 2010. *The American West at the End of the Twentieth Century* was the subtitle. Did you create the subtitle?

LN: I didn't. A friend of mine who is an art historian at Santa Cruz suggested that.

TS: Was the title yours?

LN: *Railroad Noir* I came up with. That's the difficult title.

TS: I have to confess I had to look up what *noir* meant.

LN: Well, you know, it was dark stories from the railroad and I wanted . . .

TS: It's the word for black in French?

LN: Like "film noir." I wanted to get that feeling.

TS: I think it comes through from the parts that I've read. And the characters themselves—it's implied that they are seedy characters, or maybe that's not the word for it, but characters that are complex, to say the least.

LN: Yes. Dickensian characters I would almost say.

TS: Yes, going back to your dissertation. So that came out in 2010.

LN: I had to fight for the photography in that book as well. That's fine art photography, four-color fine art photography [by Joel Jensen]. The photography reproductions are amazing—black and white and color!

TS: Well, that would be about the time you were getting a full professorship as well?

LN: Yes.

TS: So it probably helped with that. I think I saw something about you doing a book on learning Spanish or something like that.

LN: That's my current book that I just finished.

TS: Oh, it's not out yet?

LN: No, it's at the University of New Mexico, and they are reviewing it right now.

TS: I see, well, that's why I couldn't find it. What is that book going to be about?

LN: That story is from going to Mexico for the last twenty-odd years.

TS: So very early on you got involved in study abroad?

LN: Initially, I went to Mexico to learn Spanish while I was still working on the railroad. The railroad would lay me off in the winter. At some point they wanted to get rid of crewmembers, so they offered a reserve board where it was like the farmers getting paid

not to work. You could be called back. They could run crews with only one brakeman, and your position didn't have to be filled. They paid you half of your salary to be on reserve. Most people couldn't make it on half salary, but I could. So I used that time to go to Mexico and live with a family and go to a school and study Spanish. Again!

TS: That they wouldn't let you do at Berkeley.

LN: Yes.

TS: Okay, so why did you want to learn Spanish?

LN: I'd been to Mexico on a trip about a year before, and I met the most interesting people I'd ever met in my life in Chiapas. I found weaving, and it just blew my mind. I realized I had to learn Spanish or I was not going to be able to function. I was going to go back. Also, on the railroad so many people were riding the rails who were immigrants.

TS: Oh, what about the workers?

LN: Yes, but the workers had to know English to work, at least in my craft. But a lot of undocumented people were in our yards, and they were in danger a lot of times. I'd run into them walking the train in the middle of the desert or whatever. It's nice to be able to communicate.

TS: Were they riding the rails like the people back in the Great Depression?

LN: Of course, they were. Every train coming out of El Paso had about two hundred people on it.

TS: Were they in boxcars?

LN: They were under the floorboards in the engine; they were everywhere.

TS: That's pretty dangerous.

LN: Yes, it was very dangerous.

TS: Okay, you go to Mexico and you learn Spanish.

LN: Yes, I lived with a family, and I went to school and went back every year. So by the time I came to Kennesaw in '99, I'd been going to Mexico for ten years every year learning Spanish or spending more and more time there.

TS: So this provides an excuse to go to Mexico through study abroad?

LN: Yes. One of the draw things that Laura Dabundo mentioned to me was that they had a study abroad program in Oaxaca that the English Department faculty went on. That's where I had been learning Spanish.

TS: I know [KSU history professor] Alan V. LeBaron used to go down there. I guess he still does.

LN: He started the program. About the same time I was down there learning Spanish he was down there starting the Kennesaw program.

TS: But you didn't know him.

LN: No.

TS: From the beginning you would go down there, and what would you teach?

LN: World Lit and writing, travel writing.

TS: So you teach the standard World Lit course?

LN: Yes, I teach a four-week World Lit class that was . . .

TS: Same content I guess.

LN: Well, I tried to take advantage of Latin America.

TS: Sure—literature of Latin America.

LN: Yes.

TS: Okay. So what's the book about?

LN: The book starts out with my just going there to learn Spanish. But then at a certain point the narrator changes from a brakeman who is traveling all around learning Spanish and buying crafts and going to craft villages and buying things to somebody who is bringing students. It changes into the way I've been going to Mexico most recently, which is to bring students down there. I'm still interested in the crafts, but now that I can speak Spanish, I started collecting interviews with people who make crafts or people who've crossed the border. The same thing I did on the railroad, I started getting stories from other people about Mexico. It's still mostly my story in the beginning of the book, but then less and less and less my story and more and more and more other people's stories. So it ends with other peoples' stories, which is kind of the way a lot of my books have ended, really.

TS: You were talking about how you're still mining stuff from years ago. Do you have a collection of tapes or transcripts? Do you do transcripts of your interviews?

LN: I did with the railroad interviews, but the Mexican interviews not at all. I don't tape anything.

TS: Oh, you don't tape?

LN: No.

TS: Does the tape turn them off?

LN: Yes, I think it does. What I do is double check the details, so I try to get as much as I can, and then I go back and say, “Is this really what happened? Is this what you said? I didn’t understand this. Would you elaborate?”

TS: Okay. I guess you didn’t ever use release forms or anything like that.

LN: No.

TS: Your purpose is to get something that you can do some creative writing with.

LN: Yes, and I asked them for permission. Yes, I asked permission.

TS: Do they sign anything?

LN: No.

TS: But they orally give you permission?

LN: Yes.

TS: So you tell them when you start asking them questions, “Can I use this”?

LN: Well, first I say, “I’d love to tell your story. Can I? It’s for a book and it’s going to be this press. And can I use your story?” In some cases I don’t want to put people in danger. One story was of a craftsman who I found a little piece by him in a garage sale in Marietta. I turned it over and there was his name and the village. I thought, “I’m going to be there in a month taking students. I think I’ll stop by and find him.” So I go to his village and, “No, he’s not here; he’s working in Santa Cruz, California, for the last twelve years, but his in-laws live right up the street.” So I go up there, and I meet his in-laws, and they bring out the book and show me my piece in the book of his crafts and stuff, and they said, “Oh, we haven’t heard from him. We only get these phone calls, and we don’t know where he lives.”

I didn’t expect them to tell me, but I know a lot of people in Santa Cruz, so I found him in Santa Cruz. I interviewed him, and I asked if I could tell his story. But I didn’t want to use his name, so when it came to the point of, “I have to write this story,” I changed his name. But then he sunk from sight again. Then I found him again, and I said, “Is it okay to use your name and try to get in touch with you.” “Oh, sure you can use my name.” I said, “Well, it might be dangerous to you.” “How?” I said, “Well, you know because you’re illegal.” He said, “Oh, I’ve got my papers.” So in the course of four or five years of this thing sort of playing out, he’d become legal, and I could use his name. I just found that out last September, so a lot of these detail checkings have taken extended periods of time. It’s different than like, “Here, sign.” It’s a whole different process. Then I was going to go back and interview the relatives again, but then I felt so ashamed at the tragedy of the story that they couldn’t come visit their own relatives, and here I could, that I was just too ashamed to go visit them. Then I had to write about that, so these stories just pile up in complexity.

TS: Sure. So who’s the publisher for that?

LN: University of New Mexico Press is looking at it. They gave me a pre-publication contract on it, but it doesn't obligate them. They still have to go through their review process.

TS: Right, so they may say change something? You're still waiting to hear?

LN: They could. Yes. Valerie [A.] Dibble [professor of Art] photographed my craft objects. She teaches photography here, and she did a beautiful job of photographing them. So it's going to have a few pictures, but not fine art.

TS: Right. In your acknowledgements in *Railroad Noir* I see some names that I recognize from Kennesaw like Kay A. Reeve that were readers for you.

LN: Yes.

TS: Of course, she teaches the history of the American West.

LN: Yes, we team taught several times.

TS: Oh, that's right; I'd forgotten that. Did you enjoy doing that?

LN: Oh, yes, sure. I learned so much. Well, I think she did too; we both learned a lot.

TS: So you did Western literature, Western history?

LN: Yes.

TS: That's great. Dede and I did Georgia History, Georgia Literature for years and years, and I always enjoyed doing that. Okay, so let me just ask about how your job has evolved in your seventeen years here at Kennesaw. How has the job evolved, how has the English Department evolved, and how has Kennesaw evolved over seventeen years? Are we a different place now than we were when you started here, do you think?

LN: Oh sure, we've doubled or tripled.

TS: Much bigger.

LN: Absolutely.

TS: And I guess the MAPW program . . .

LN: Well, we're having a little slump right now. I hope we can revive ourselves.

TS: Oh, really.

LN: Yes. I also have been teaching for the master's program in American Studies and teaching undergraduate classes that are cross-listed English and American Studies—gender and women's studies—and I'm just going to affiliate now with Latin American Studies as well.

TS: Well, there aren't going to be any lack of courses that you can teach it doesn't look like.

- LN: Well, no. I teach writing, creative non-fiction, and I also teach the border—this has been reading I've done as a result of my learning Spanish and pursuing reading in Mexican literature and Latin American literature. That's been ever since 1990 I've been reading in that area. So I can bring it to classes in American Studies, and it also crosses with English. So I'm succeeding in bringing Spanish into studying English, which I was told I couldn't do in 1964. Now we're doing it. We're becoming very bilingual in American literature. I'm very happy about that. It's exciting for me to be able to do that.
- TS: Yes, that is good. I think American Studies is not just the United States. The very term American could apply to the whole two continents.
- LN: Exactly.
- TS: I guess we're evolving for the better in some ways.
- LN: Yes. Well, the book I just did has a ten-page Spanish glossary in the back, so it's fairly bilingual as well.
- TS: I did an interview with Ernesto P. Silva last fall, and his story is fascinating. He overstayed a visitor's visa for years and year and years and eventually gained his citizenship. He had some interesting insights about the growth of the Hispanic population in the United States and how patriotic they are, and how people worried about immigrants changing America don't need to worry because America changes them a lot faster than they change America. I think Latin American studies will be a growing field as the demographics of America change. We will all have to learn Spanish, eventually.
- LN: I think so. It's a good thing, not just the language, but we get to revitalize a whole different mythology, a whole new culture. World Lit isn't just the Greek myths anymore, but now we get to have Mesoamerican stories to play with in literature.
- TS: Some people think that Kennesaw is moving more and more to where scholarship is the end all of everything as far as promotion and tenure. Have you felt the pressure in that direction, or have you been doing so much scholarship that it wouldn't be pressure in your case?
- LN: I think it saved me. It's kept me out of politics, you know, just simply writing. I understand that this is the new drift, but my concern is that there isn't the support that goes along with the new drift. You have to have time. I'm very aware of how much time it takes. I wouldn't have been able to finish either of the books that I finished here without the faculty enhancement leaves at the end so I could get over the finish line.
- TS: Right. And that came from CETL?
- LN: Yes. But I don't think that faculty should have to compete for research time. As long as they're being judged on their research, I think they should have it. Yes, I understand we're going in a new direction. I just hope all of us go in that new direction with the support that we need.

- TS: So you think it's the direction we ought to be going. It's just that we're not receiving the support we need?
- LN: I think for faculty to have support and time for research can only help their teaching and their service. I'm absolutely for that direction, but it has to be supported.
- TS: Let me ask the question another way: What has kept you here for seventeen years? I mean, it was almost like going to a foreign country to come to Georgia from California, although in a sense you went from suburbia in California to suburbia in Georgia. But you don't impress me as a suburbanite, particularly. You're much more interested in the workers and the railroads and so on. Let me just ask you, what has kept you here as opposed to maybe looking for a job back in California?
- LN: Well, it's probably because I've been involved in some writing project or other pretty much all the time. Writers don't like to move. Once you're some place, you don't want to be disturbed. A move means two years out of your life where you do nothing but that, and I haven't had those two years. And I like teaching here. I genuinely like the students. They are working people. I get along with them. I've always liked the soldiers that have been in my class. I've taken a lot of military people to Oaxaca to learn Spanish. I get along with them because they're like people that I worked with on the railroad. I think it's great that we have an almost free tuition system here and people can have a second change in education. All those things I really like.
- TS: Some of those folks that are paying \$3,600 a semester for tuition don't think it's free.
- LN: Yes, well, that's a lot for people. I liked it better when it was less money.
- TS: We're still probably one of the best bargains in higher education compared to what tuition is in most other states.
- LN: Oh, yes. And I can also run a summer program where I can offer those people a Harvard-like experience in Mexico, an amazing experience really for very little money. I consider that to be so valuable; it's like putting flip-flops on the ground in Oaxaca. I like hearing people's life stories and enabling them to write them. That's another thing I think almost anyone can do. The answer is I really enjoy my job. I'll probably keep doing it as long as I enjoy it!
- TS: That's about the end of my questions. I did want to ask you: Didn't I read that you were branching out into writing about other kinds of transportation like automobiles or different kinds of travel?
- LN: I think my next book, honestly, is going to be about music [laughs]. That's what I dropped out to do in Santa Cruz. That's what I do in my free time.
- TS: What instruments do you play?
- LN: I play the guitar, ukulele, saxophone, and flute.
- TS: That's a variety. That's great. What have I not asked you about that you'd like to talk about?

- LN: I guess American Studies. I was glad to be part of getting that going with Sarah [R.] Robbins.
- TS: Do you want to talk about that a little bit?
- LN: Well, I really benefitted from that personally in terms of my academic interest. It's allowed me to teach in exactly what I am studying, whereas I think in English I pretty much left that quite a long time ago. Even American literature is a little bit too restrictive for me now. Having American Studies exist as a discipline has given me a place where I can pursue the literature that I've been reading.
- TS: That brings up another question. I used to hear from the people that started at Kennesaw in the 1960s or 1970s and spent their careers here that one of the things they liked about Kennesaw was the chance to create new courses and new fields of study that hadn't been offered before on this campus. The newness of the institution meant that they could do things for the first time, and they didn't have to wait twenty years for their turn. I haven't heard that so much lately. But you sound very much like the old-timers. I guess my question is, do you think there's still a place at Kennesaw to go beyond your dissertation and your graduate work and recreate yourself and recreate a discipline?
- LN: Well I've certainly found that to be the case. I think with the Interdisciplinary Studies umbrella, they can't fund full-time faculty themselves, but they do allow a place for faculty to teach certain courses that are in line with their research interests where perhaps they'd have to wait in line to schedule a class like that in the English Department, say. But in the Interdisciplinary Studies they can always teach an undergraduate class that has that focus. It's very creative. There's nothing better than to really bounce ideas off other people and to share readings with students when that's exactly what you're exploring. So it's wonderful really.
- TS: Sounds very exciting.
- LN: Yes, it is; it really is good.
- TS: So it may not be true across campus, but maybe creative people find areas like that. I've interviewed Ernesto Silva, for instance who came here to teach Spanish, but obviously is far more interested in Interdisciplinary Studies nowadays.
- LN: Yes. Well, two of the classes I'm teaching this semester are American Studies classes, and I'm teaching one creative writing class. One of the American Studies classes is cross-listed with English, and most of the students are from English. I don't know that it would fly as an English class, but I don't have to know.
- TS: Well that's like when Dede and I were doing Georgia History, Georgia Literature. It was cross-listed as English, History, or American Studies, and we never had trouble filling the class in all three areas.
- LN: Yes, I've always thought Kennesaw was a creative place. They wouldn't have hired me if it wasn't because, honestly, I didn't fit any mold. I was completely crazy. I mean, I'm

a switchman. I had great credentials, and I had great publications, but it was a switchman. Who hires a switchman?

TS: Well, that says something positive about Kennesaw

LN: It is. It's can-do; can you do it?

TS: Right. So I guess the goal is to just keep that spirit at Kennesaw.

LN: Well, it's the spirit of the future because that's what it's going to take. There's going to be so much change that the question is, can you do it? It's going to be big questions.

TS: Have you been involved with the consolidation at all?

LN: No, I ducked. I was writing a book, and I had to finish it.

TS: I would think that some of the folks down on the Marietta campus would be attracted to a lot of the things you are doing, people are technologically inclined and people in areas like the Department of Digital Writing and Media Arts. But you haven't had any contact?

LN: No. I went down there to recruit for my summer program and put up a few posters and talked to a few classes.

TS: Did you get any results?

LN: Yes, I think we're going again

TS: Anything else that you want to talk about?

LN: No, I think that's about it.

TS: Well, I've had a good time listening to your stories today.

LN: Great.

TS: I really appreciate it.

LN: That's for asking me. This was really fun.

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