

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Julia Hudson, Class of 2008

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Julia Hudson talks about her views on Smith traditions, particularly Convocation, and the importance of the school's house culture, especially in formation of strong, lasting friendships. She discusses the way political thinking was developed in conversation with other Smithies and how issues of race, religion and sex were all part of the conversation.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Hudson, Julia. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Julia Hudson, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 18, 2013, with:

JULIA HUDSON

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: And we're rolling. Excellent. All right. So this is Annie Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Julia Hudson on May 18, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you in advance for agreeing to be part of this.

HUDSON: You're very welcome.

AMES: Yeah. So I'm just going to start with some intros, openings. Why did you choose to attend the reunion this year?

HUDSON: Because I hadn't seen my closest friends in five years, all in one place, because we all live around the country now. And I live in Boston, so.

AMES: Okay. And I should clarify, this is just a laundry list. If you could kind of try to repeat the question in your --

HUDSON: Repeat the question.

AMES: -- in your sentence. You know, kind of a complete sentence because I'm not mic'd and --

HUDSON: Got you.

AMES: -- so it might seem like you're just kind of talking to yourself.

HUDSON: (Laughs).

AMES: Which is fine. Which is fine.

HUDSON: It might seem like I'm talking to myself.

AMES: (Laughs). All right. All right. So as an undergrad, how did you come to be at Smith?

HUDSON: I came to Smith actually as a transfer student. I started -- I decided I wanted to go

as far away from home as possible. So I went to Southern California and hated it. And realized I love New England, so (laughs), I came back. And I also realized I wanted to study economics and my school didn't have that as a program. So I wanted a place that had good economics, good dance and was in New England, so.

AMES: And Smith fit the bill.

HUDSON: Yeah.

AMES: So why did you choose to come to a women's college?

HUDSON: Well, there's the irony. Why did I choose to come to a women's college? I actually went -- my high school was the old Wellesley Prep. So I went to a girl's high school and hated it. And like petitioned and begged and protested to transfer and I actually ended up at public school. And then I never thought I would ever go back into an all women's school. But I have no idea what it was, I just fell in love with it, so I said, whatever. They all become classmates in the end anyway. You don't look at them and go, that's a guy, that's a girl. They're all just your classmates.

AMES: Absolutely. Absolutely. So what was your impression of Smith when you first arrived?

HUDSON: Oh, I loved it.

AMES: Yeah.

HUDSON: Gorgeous. (Laughs). Yeah, just strikingly beautiful. And I first got to see it, actually a friend of mine who was already here, showed me around campus before I started. And over the summer when no one was here, and I was like, this is so peaceful. And when I first started here, I loved convocation. That, I remember being like my first real memory. And I loved it. And I hear the administration's trying to get rid of naked convocation. Never. It should never happen. Naked convocation forever.

AMES: I'm glad we agree on that.

HUDSON: Absolutely.

AMES: I'm so glad we agree on that.

HUDSON: Take off your clothes, whatever. Let's do it.

AMES: So what were your expectations coming in?

HUDSON: My expectations coming into Smith? I'm not sure I had a lot of expectations of the school. I had expectations of myself because I'd been very unhappy at my first school and I was ready to only do the things that made me happy when I got here. So I dove into the dance department and I dove into actually getting my degree wrapped up. I ended up actually finishing early. Like, my expectations were just to have a happy time for myself. I didn't actually really think much about what the school was going to give me. I just wanted a place where I could be good to me.

AMES: Excellent. So when you think about your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

HUDSON: Albright House. That is the thing I think of when I think of Smith. I was in Albright. I was actually only here five semesters because I also took a semester abroad. But I was in Albright, Albright diehard. (Laughs). My house is absolutely what I think of and all my friends. I don't even have a lot of friends in my class. All my friends are my house friends.

AMES: Are you staying in Albright during reunion?

HUDSON: No, they put us in the Quad. I don't get to be in Albright now. Which is actually cool because it's trippy, (laughs) and fun. But, yeah, no, my whole life was Albright. And the Smithereens, should shout them out.

AMES: So we've talked about your love of convocation.

HUDSON: Mm-hm.

AMES: Do you have any other favorites with traditions?

HUDSON: I remember a naked bike ride was one of my favorites. I don't even know if that was an official tradition or if my friends just liked to be naked a lot (laughs). But I didn't even do it, either, but going along like cheering my friends on like biking naked through the campus was totally one of my favorites. And Illumination night. I mean it's -- to have a lot of the traditions that I remember now are graduation traditions. So, it's hard to actually remember it. Also Vespers. I love Vespers. I actually came back for Vespers this year, so.

AMES: So were you involved in any extracurriculars?

HUDSON: Yep, I was in -- my extracurriculars were basically dance. Which I ended up last minute minoring in. Like a minute before the deadline running, giving in my paper. So a lot of dancing and Smithereens, which is a cult, but a fun cult, (laughs).

AMES: So, how did you decide on your major and, you know, focus of study?

HUDSON: I decided on my major in a very roundabout route, much like my career, (laughs). I went into college thinking I was going to do like religion studies or theater. I thought I'd be doing something very humanities based. But realized I did that old-fashioned thing they always tell you to do of when you're deciding what to study, flip through the course book and just circle all the classes you want to take and major in the department that most of them are in. And I realized it was economics. It was -- I wanted to learn about hunger and I wanted to learn about development and I wanted to learn about social justice. And it was all in the economics department. So I learned math along the way.

AMES: So how do you describe a typical Smithie during your undergrad years?

HUDSON: Ooh, that's a terrible -- sorry. That's a terrible question, (laughs). Because we talk about typical Smithies and we get so stereotyped. But like walking an Ivy Day just now and seeing so many generations, there is not a typical Smithie. And I get pissed off when I do things like cut off all my hair, and people say, "Oh, God, you went to Smith, didn't you?" Like I don't think there is a typical Smithie at all and I think that's why I like it. This place became radical and much less typical over the last couple of decades and that's why I like this place so much, so.

AMES: That's encourage-ish -- pretty good answer.

HUDSON: Sorry, I hate all my questions. It's not you.

AMES: Oh, this is good. We need some feedback.

HUDSON: (Laughs).

AMES: So you mentioned you went abroad. Where did you go?

HUDSON: My abroad experience was actually untraditional. I graduated a semester early, or I had the credits to. So I just took a personal leave and I took the tuition I would have spent and I moved to Prague and got an internship and an apartment for a semester. And I -- actually I had a Smith friend who's doing the Prague abroad program, so I had a friend, but I just got a job, an apartment and then took four weeks and went backpacking by myself. So and I work in the travel industry now. So that was kind of a lot of what sparked me to want to do that. But maybe that's why I didn't do an actual educational program.

AMES: Well, did your non-traditional time abroad, did that influence your retrospective Smith experience, when you look back?

HUDSON: Yeah. No. And I got a really cool internship while I was there. Which was -- I was analyzing loans made by the European investment bank to African countries for energy development projects. Don't know how I landed that internship at like 20 years old, but I did. And I loved actually working with non-Americans about

non-American issues. And it helped a lot. Because while I loved the education I got here, and we do have a great international student community, you're still learning economics with an American perspective from usually American teachers with other Americans. So, absolutely going abroad was worth it. I would do it again in a heartbeat.

AMES: Excellent. Were there any professors or mentors that inspired you during your time at Smith?

HUDSON: Yeah. There were two; Arda Spence (phonetic), who's no longer with the school. She was an economics professor who couldn't get tenure. And that's why she had to leave and she worked -- but she's still, I think, working for the government. Donna Mejia, who was a dance artist in residence. And I think she stayed teaching in Northampton after her residency ended. Absolutely amazing tribal fusion dancer. So she just gave an awesome perspective on like when you do ethnic dance. And you're really putting in your body another culture, what that means and how to do it in a sensitive way and not in a caricature. Which is awesome because belly dance can be a real caricature dance style. And then I have to give love to Mary Murphy. She was a math professor. I don't know if she's still here. Because I was on a crusade to require more math for the econ degree, because at least when I was here they only required calc 1. Students would graduate and we actually weren't qualified to get a masters. We weren't qualified to go into grad school in our field.

And so I was petitioning the department, you need to require calc 2 because we don't have the math background. And what we kept getting told was that Smith wanted to graduate more women in stem or at least quantitative fields, so they didn't want to scare us away from the econ major by requiring more math. But instead they were graduating us totally unqualified. So I, as part of my petition, I just started taking math pass/fail. So I was taking math I was terrible at, but like I knew I needed to do it. And Mary Murphy like got me through my math classes. Like great mentor, really took care of me. Would have like one-on-one sessions and walk me through my work. So she got me through it. I love her. And Smithies require more math.

AMES: Let's see, are there any stories that you want to share from your time here? Any specific stories that come to mind?

HUDSON: There are lots of stories, most of which I probably shouldn't share. I think my personal favorite which -- my personal favorite story on the eve of Carol Christ's departure from the school, one of my good friends, who is here with me, Eliza Parsons, she and I, for reasons I will never be able to explain, became obsessed with Carol Christ. Like the moment we landed here. Both transfer students. I don't know what happened. I think it might have been her last name. I don't know. So we would do things like leave her personal voicemails asking her for Mountain Day. And write her thank you notes. I once stole a friend's animatronic

dinosaur toy and we made an appointment with President Christ to take photos, like have a photo shoot with her and this dinosaur. And then put posters up around the school of like her shaking this dinosaur's little claw.

I don't know what it was, but we became really into her. And now, at my desk at work, I'm really shocked I'm sharing the story. Eliza made me a little magnet of Carol Christ's face and mailed it to me from across the country. And it is now on my desk at work. I have Carol Christ watching over me at the office. And people ask me like, oh, is that -- is that your mom? Is that your grandmother? Like is that a relative of yours? And I was like, no, that was my college president. And they're like, oh, did -- is that like did you really know her? Like was that something they sold at your school? I was like, no, no, I didn't really know her, but my friend became obsessed and made me a magnet of her head. So that's my story.

AMES: The best possible outcome to a story like that, is that you get a souvenir at the end. You know, you **18:57:44.

HUDSON: Oh, absolutely.

AMES: I was hoping **18:57:46 there would be some physical proof, you know, like you **18:57:48 happy.

HUDSON: We might have rewritten the school song to be about Carol Christ. We also might have an Ivy Day just now as we walked by the podium and she's like clapping for all the alums. We might have screamed, we love you, Carol, love us. I don't know and I really hope I don't end up on a watch list. Please continue.

AMES: On that note. What was your house community like when you were at Smith?

HUDSON: It went from pretty bad to pretty awesome in the three years that I was here. When I came to Albright, it was just a hot bed of drama. It was very weird. I don't know why. And then at some point, I don't know how it happened. We magically got this awesome house community together. And I love -- I mean most the people I still stay in touch with are from Albright House. So, you know, I don't know how that happened. But it was some alchemy. We all ended up becoming really close.

AMES: And how did that community influence the rest of your time at Smith?

HUDSON: Oh, God, there's nothing like coming back to a home at the end of the day. I've lived in cement block dorms and like terrible apartments. And like where you don't feel that community -- or you feel like you have to like stay hidden in your room all the time. Like it's not friendly to be in common spaces and you just get so your shoulders drop at the end of the day. You get to relax when you come home. Yeah, I would not ever go back to a dorm.

AMES: That's fair, that's fair.

HUDSON: I did for grad schedule though, so I'm not entirely telling the truth that it was awful. Now I will never do it again.

AMES: Let's see how would you describe the campus atmosphere during your four years here? Or not your four years here -- experience at Smith?

HUDSON: The campus atmosphere, it really depended on the time of year. I always tell my friends, I describe Smith as a pressure cooker. And I actually -- I do alum admission interviews in Boston now. And when the interviewees are like asking me what it's like on campus, I always have to tell them out of the goodness of my heart, you're going into a very high stress place. And it's easy now that I'm no longer here to let it fade into lovely memories and only think of the good times. But it's fucking difficult to be a student here. The sheer quantity of work. So you get it the wrong time of the year and everyone's stressed and freaking out. But at the end of the day, I think I liked at least having the energy of being around people who really cared about their educations. And they cared about studying something that was important to them and not just showing up, getting the credits and leaving. That was really different than at other schools, but.

AMES: How did the campus change during your time at Smith?

HUDSON: I'm not sure and I feel like maybe because I was only here five semesters, I don't have a great window on that. You know I think something that's always been hard is dealing with politics on campus. I remember I think my senior year, I think, there was a very right wing controversial speaker coming and being hosted by the Smith Republicans. And he was speaking, I believe, at Neilson and huge protest. I wasn't part of it, but huge protests. People didn't want to hear him speak because he was very homophobic and I didn't -- he brought his own camera crew. He was, I think, trying to get a rise out of the student community. And, you know, I wasn't down with the protest, but I also wasn't down with inviting him. But the problem was it felt super polarized. And I think that has happened a lot. I've stayed in touch with some of the younger students who've stayed here after I left. And I was also hearing about -- is it called Gold Key? The --

AMES: Yes.

HUDSON: -- yeah, the tours and the transgender students hosting students for Gold Key. And again, it feels like there's -- or, we're talking now about admitting transwomen as students. I just so often feel like the conversations get very hard one side, very hard the other and it's -- for people who want to just hear a little of both or have a middle view, it gets a little complicated and I often found I bowed out of the real intense discussions. So I don't know if that -- that's not the campus changing. I think that's actually been something that has continued to happen forever. But it's something that I would love to see change. So.

AMES: That's fascinating to hear your look at that. So the polarity, nature of the campus, did that influence your urge to act or not act of behalf of activism?

HUDSON: Yeah and that sucks. The polarity of the campus I think, it's something that's going to happen. It's a lot of really passionate people in a small space and in a small town.

AMES: A very liberal -- a very liberal small town.

HUDSON: Absolutely, yeah. And a lot of very politically aware people and that's what you get when you have a school that is by its nature, on political group of peoples -- of women's college. So like, you're already setting up political boundaries when you step on campus. So I get it. It happens. But I mean since graduating -- I mean I've always been feminist, but I've become really an ardent feminist. Like really understanding where the history and work comes from in a way that I -- I never took like a women history or any course in college. But when it comes to actual activism, I still just kind of have this knee jerk. I don't want to get so stressed about it because it's the personal stress. And I'm like I will live my politics,⁴ but as much as I would to have more conversations, more activism, the combativeness that I think, you know, I think it carries over from Smith and it's also part of media culture, too. It's really a turnoff to me, personally.

AMES: Absolutely. What challenges did you face during your career at Smith?

HUDSON: That I tried a quantitative major that was really hard. That was a big challenge. I think learning how to deal with social stress was a big challenge, but was definitely worth it. And I -- again, I hate the stereotype of how did go to a women's school? All girls living together, weren't you all catty and whatever. And I was like, no, God, they're my family. Absolutely not. But you still fight like hell with your family. And just learning when to -- when it was appropriate to get involved to help somebody versus, no, you need to deal with that and I need to not get involved in your drama or your stress. That, I think, was a huge lesson that I learned from being here. Yeah.

AMES: So despite the somewhat difficult nature of the political atmosphere on campus --

HUDSON: But vibrant political atmosphere.

AMES: -- Yes, definitely. Did you participate in student activism of any kind?

HUDSON: No, I was -- I don't think I really did much activism in an organized way while I was here. A lot of conversations and I think, especially because of the house atmosphere, I think half of our activism is in the conversations we have with other that are actually pretty open conversations a lot of the time. But marching around holding signs? Not so much. I think I -- that's a lie. I did a undocumented immigrant march downtown in support of undocumented immigrants. But I don't

think so. I think it was mainly just exploring with the people that I was around, what we were all thinking about.

AMES: Okay. Do you remember any campus-wide issues around religion, class, race or sexuality?

HUDSON: Yeah. Absolutely. Religion has always actually made me sad. I'm not particularly religious but I used to go to church every week. And I would go to Helen Hills Hills and there would be eight people there. Interfaith service at a school of like 2,600 people, however many of us there are. And eight people would go to service, an interfaith service. And that really made me sad that I think a lot of teens were turned off by just the idea of religion. I don't know if that's still the case, obviously. But I would say Jennifer Walters is my jam. Dean Jennifer Walters is so awesome. So, yeah, I think religion just made people uncomfortable more than anything else. Race, I think, it got awkward at times. Albright is right across from Unity House. And it was -- I mean we would go to parties there and stuff, but it was always hard. Sometimes they'd be like wanted to host an event and weren't allowed, but everyone's welcome.

So there's just little things like that, just little tensions. Definitely class is always an issue. Definitely. This school is expensive as shit. And we always call it the cardigan -- the pearls and twin sets mentality of old Smith, Charlotte York, Sex in the City, Old Smith. And I'm like no. That's not at all what this place is. But there's, I think, a huge tension when you have students who don't have a lot of money who come here and are working their tails off on top of a huge workload to like pay their way through school. And then there's a lot of us who didn't have to do that. And I think money is something we talk about very awkwardly, if we talk about it at all. But that's kind of true everywhere. Nobody's good at talking about money. So, especially at private institutions you have to pay to join.

AMES: Naturally.

HUDSON: So, it's a private club.

AMES: What were your experiences with dating and relationships within the context of Smith?

HUDSON: Oh, God, dating? So I'm queer and I knew that coming in but I had never dated a woman because if you -- you know, it's much easier to meet men than it is to meet women and I met them more often. But I have never billed in the closet and fine. So I came here and I loved that people were just open. And they talked about sex. Actually one thing that I still need to train myself not to do is not say tranny or dyke. Because they're words we threw around just as friends. Actually my good friend calls herself a fag. I'm like, great -- that's great. I will never call you that. But that's cute for you. As other things, upon leaving the community I've had to train myself not to do because it was never a big deal to me while I was here. But

I remember I did have a serious girlfriend for a while, while I was here. And it was -- as soon as I started dating her, other girls would look at me. Like I had my lesbian street cred or something. And I was like, oh, yeah, I've been queer, like, but I didn't present, I guess or I don't know. But as soon as I dated one girl, it was like I'd unlocked the door and other girls are like, oh, you.

AMES: You're kidding. You're kidding.

HUDSON: Exactly. So that -- it was super frustrating. And I have actually another good friend who's here ran into me, she's a lesbian and she has had the hardest time meeting people because she presents as straight. And she's like I'm not. I swear I'm not. But I really would love for people to consider that I might be gay, without just a cursory look at me. So, that's something I think Smith could probably still -- well, still, as of five years ago, it could have stood to improve on, while I was a student. But it's tough. You got to glance and someone and you have to sum them up quickly if you don't know them. And -- but it definitely -- and then the butch/femme thing sometimes got a bit combative as well. Not combative but definitely a little like the boys club. There was like a Facebook group and they would go hang out and like no one else was invited. I was like that's so weird to me. Like I get it. You need your community, you need your safe space. But like they're my friends, can I not come?

AMES: I can be very isolating and it's in here to hear you talk about that because that is something a lot of people in the community here have experienced, you know, kind of an overlooking just based on presentation. And that's a great ironic to me in the face of, you know, thousands of, you know, queer women. You know?

HUDSON: Yeah.

AMES: It's a very interesting phenomenon.

HUDSON: It is thousands of queer women. That's an amazing thing to realize too. I'm like, dude, I am so in my zone. It was weird, when I would go back to the city for vacation or whatever and I'd see straight couples holding hands. I always go, what? Oh. Oh! My good friend -- I love that I'm going to record this on camera. My friend has a crush on Mariska Hargitay. Who doesn't have a crush on Mariska Hargitay? And when -- she's an actress, had her baby and she was just like, how did she have a baby? She doesn't even have a wife. And I was like that is entirely how babies are made. Like totally just forgot. Actually, I loved that this was such a homo-normative was that word she was using last night. Homo-normative zone in a way, just because I love the mind trip that it gives you. And it does make you rethink. But actually dating got tricky. A lot of making out with straight girls and that got old. That's in passing.

AMES: Well, as I would love to talk about this for another half hour or hour, etc., we have to, you know, bring it in, you've got five minutes left.

HUDSON: Okay.

AMES: So I just want to ask you a few questions about --

HUDSON: Sure.

AMES: -- your life after Smith and --

HUDSON: Sure.

AMES: -- then wrap it all up.

HUDSON: Sure.

AMES: So, who have you become since you attended Smith?

HUDSON: Who have I become? A slightly better dressed version of me five years ago, I hope. Gods, graduating sucked because I'm a class of 2008. So I think it was about September of 2008 that the bottom fell out of the market. And I made the brilliant decision to work at a summer camp, my summer after school. And then I got an internship with Oxfam and that was awesome. I was like great, I love Oxfam. They paid me \$8 an hour with no benefits. I was supposed to be there for three months. There was no job. Like, period, I could not get a job. By the way, I'm really -- I hope I'm not scaring you guys. And I had an ecom degree, I had done well in school. I had plenty -- I had like probably at least a dozen internships in my life, now at this point. And I couldn't get a job. So I stayed there for 10 months on \$8 an hour. And then I ended up quitting and moving back in with my mom. And a whole mind fuck, who am I?

And I kept changing what I wanted to go to grad school for. I knew I wanted to go to grad school. So I said, I will do law. I took the LSAT. Then said, I'm not doing law. That's a terrible idea. Then I said, I want to study security and intelligence. So I was looking into that and I was like great. And then I changed my mind again. And I was like, you know, whatever I want to do, whatever I decide, I remember, September 2009. I was like whatever I want to do by September, I'm applying for school for. I'm just doing it. I make impulsive decisions. And I studied dance. So I went and got my masters degree in dance and dance research. And that was awesome. I had taken some time off and backpacked in Asia and like traveled and done whatever it is you do when you're waiting to start grad school. And did grad school. Actually I ended up publishing which was kind of awesome.

And now I work in travel. I am working in marketing. I'm a copywriter for a big travel company. And I'm kind of just stowing money away until I can go travel again. But, yeah, I don't know who I've become. I think I've become a bit more thoughtful. I have stayed just as impulsive. I make terrible decisions on the fly,

but at least they're usually fun. And I've become much -- I've become a better friend, I think definitely. And I think that's something as you get older, I think you do get better at keeping just the people around you that you want around you. And they're good to you back. And I'm happy to say I think I've reached that kind of stasis, equilibrium point-ish about now. I feel like I know who my friends are and they're fruitful, loving relationships. I've gotten a lot better at reading people and treating people well.

AMES: All right. Well, in just the few minutes that we have left, I'm going to ask you one more question.

HUDSON: Sure.

AMES: Do you any advice for current and future Smithies as graduates?

HUDSON: Watch your temper. That's a piece of advice for my current and future Smithies. Because anger is great and can be very useful, but tempers rarely are. Study something of value to the world, not just that you like. And I think the job market is teaching us that in a lot of ways. But also that doesn't mean just go become an accountant. Like study something that will help somebody else. So at the end of the day, even if you don't like your work, somebody else will. Somebody will benefit from it. Get enough sleep, dude. I mean that's bogus because no one will get enough sleep here. But like try. And do at least one thing that seems totally against your personality, every now and then, just try it. I cut off all my hair last week. Great. Fantastic. So that's my one recently. Great. Just to see why you think it's against your personality. Don't be so quick to say you know who you are. You probably don't. I don't.

AMES: All right. Well, that seems like a great moment to end things. But we appreciate your --

HUDSON: I hope I was profound enough.

AMES: Oh, absolutely. Always, as always. I want to thank you for your contribution. This project wouldn't be possible without the alums who come back and want to participate. So we really --

HUDSON: Dude, I want to see what other people say. Sweet, well, thank you.

AMES: Thanks so much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.