



Jessica B. Harris
New Orleans, Louisiana

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[Begin Jessica B. Harris Interview]

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Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is April 13th, a Friday, 2018, and I'm in New Orleans on Port Street at the home of Jessica B. Harris, and I'm going to have her introduce herself, please.

[0:00:22.1]

Jessica B. Harris: Okay. I am Jessica B. Harris, "Dr. J" to my favorite students. I don't know even know how to introduce myself anymore. I am recently retired from fifty years of teaching at Queens College in New York City, nothing related to food. I have written twelve cookbooks. I have written a memoir about a certain part of my life. I've done a translation of a French play. I've written a Third World women's beauty book. And I've edited a French textbook and two guides, one to France and one to Paris, in 1979—no, 1989.

I'm a founding member of the SFA. I like to call myself the midwife. **[Fertel laughter.]** If John Egerton was the daddy of the SFA, I'm certainly probably the midwife of the SFA. I got a Lifetime Achievement Award from the SFA I don't remember when. And I could go on and on and on and on, but my birthday is the 18th of March, 1948, which means I just turned seventy.

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Rien Fertel: Well, congratulations.

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Jessica B. Harris: Thank you.

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Rien Fertel: I didn't know you retired. I was going to ask that towards the end of the interview. How does it feel to be retired from fifty years of teaching?

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Jessica B. Harris: I'm not really sure yet. I'm actually—I guess technically I'm on pre-retirement leave, which basically means I have not taught this semester, and, quite frankly, I haven't set foot in or on campus this semester. So I have to clean out my office, which is on my docket for the first week of May, and God knows that's going to be a task. And then the salary changes will kick in, and that's, I guess, when I'll really know what it means to be retired. I'm not sure that I know now.

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Rien Fertel: So I want to kind of start this interview—I want to kind of pick up where your memoir ends, and your memoir, it details a part of your life, you said, and I think it's really about the [19]70s in New York and growing up around the world in the [19]70s and maybe the early [19]80s. And as the book ends, I see you as like the young lion, or lioness, coming into your own and coming into your own writing career as you see mentors.

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Jessica B. Harris: I guess so. I mean, that book was really about my relationship with Sam and the people that I met through Sam, and it's interesting that people think—or as a result of the book, people say things like, “Oh, and you are the inheritor of that tradition,” or, “They were your mentors,” because I'm not sure that that's how they would have seen themselves, and I'm not sure that that's how I saw them.

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Rien Fertel: That relationship?

[0:03:43.6]

Jessica B. Harris: Yeah. First of all, back then, the whole notion of a mentor wasn't as common as it is today. I mean, it happened, of course, but they were more sort of patterns and relationships of friendship or of collegiality or of something like that that wasn't so much a mentor, in a way. If any of them actually functioned a little bit as mentor in the current sense, it might have been, ironically, Toni Morrison. I remember she asked me to join the Authors Guild, which I didn't do—should have, probably—but that was the only one who made a step saying, “Hey, this is some of the path that you might want to be on.”

[0:04:35.4]

Rien Fertel: And when was that?

[0:04:36.8]

Jessica B. Harris: That she asked me to join the Authors Guild or when was all—well, it was back in the period of the book. That would have been in the [19]70s or the eighties at some point. I guess it must have been in the [19]80s because it was obviously after I had written a book, so there was that. But I really don't know. I mean, I don't—I certainly realize now that I probably was mentored by them, but it was a very different form of it.

[0:05:12.0]

Rien Fertel: What form?

[0:05:14.8]

Jessica B. Harris: I don't know. I think it was just really sort of being in their presence as kind of a roadmap more than anything else. I think it was just sort of the being able to sit down and to watch how they interacted with each other and things like that. I think it's also possibly the fact that I really, really saw that it was always, always, always about the work. Even at play, it was about the work. And friends remind me that even when I think I'm on vacation, I'm really not on vacation, so maybe that's the thing that rubbed off more than anything else.

[0:06:00.8]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. There's a part in the book, and there seems to be a part in your life or in your chronology of publishing where you did have several paths of work to take. You

were writing the dissertation, you were working for *Essence* magazine, traveling, writing book reviews, doing theatre criticism, and then also having a food column. Were all these things happening at once, and how did you finally choose the food and travel path?

[0:06:36.1]

Jessica B. Harris: Well, I mean, I think at some point, they chose me. It wasn't so much my choosing them. Some of it came directly out of *Essence*. I was the book review editor at *Essence* initially, and then I started to do features, and the features initially grew out of my love of theatre, so that I interviewed Woodie King Jr., who was a big producer in New York, still is. I interviewed all of the women who were in *For Colored Girls*, and those were major feature stories.

The other feature that I did was I think probably one of the—if not the earliest, the first or second interview of Toni Morrison that was ever sort of out, and she had just finished writing *Sula* at that point. As book review editor, I had done interviews with Alice Walker and with Haley—I'm going to blank on his name, and that's insane.

[0:07:49.9]

Rien Fertel: Alex Haley.

[0:07:50.5]

Jessica B. Harris: Alex Haley. I'm thinking Arthur Haley, and it's like, no, that's *Hotel*. That's not the book. Alex Haley and stuff like that. So that had been another kind of interesting sort of trajectory. But at some point, I did a—and it was an interesting trick.

They needed something, a fill-in. I had been on cruises, or at least one or two, I think, at that point, knew how to read a cruise ship map and schedule, and did a kind of romance genre short story about a cruise ship voyage as a travel article, which ran.

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Rien Fertel: Do you remember where the cruise ship went?

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Jessica B. Harris: It was a Caribbean cruise ship. It wasn't a ship I'd ever been on. It was just me reading and using the various events in the sort of manifest of the cruise ship to highlight the story. And as a result of that, they said, "Oh, maybe you should do some travel." So at that point, I was teaching French, not English, because I started out teaching French, which most people don't know.

[0:09:06.9]

Rien Fertel: At Queens College?

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Jessica B. Harris: At Queens College. Same place. And then I was going to France once or twice a year just to keep the French up. My parents thought that I might live in Europe and had gotten themselves what was kind of like an early form of timeshare in the south of Spain, and so they would go, I would go, whatever. We did all of that. And so they knew I traveled and they knew I spoke another language, and so it's like, "Well, maybe

you should be travel editor.” And I was assistant travel editor under a gentleman whose name I am going to blank on.

And then somebody looked up and said, “You know, it really doesn’t make sense for a women’s magazine to have an older man being the travel editor. Maybe you should be the travel editor.” And so that pretty much is kind of how it happened. So I was traveler editor of *Essence* for a couple of years.

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Rien Fertel: And when did the food column start?

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Jessica B. Harris: Well, that’s how the food column started, because it wasn’t really a food column. What it was was as travel editor, in discussing the editorial calendar one year, we decided that we’d alternate between writing just straight travel and writing travel and food, and that meant that every other trip was sort of food oriented, so that’s how the food came in. And I never really wrote a food column, I wrote a travel and food column, so that was that. And then that led eventually to the first book.

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Rien Fertel: And so those columns weren’t cooking at home—

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Jessica B. Harris: No, no, no. No, no, no.

[0:10:55.0]

Rien Fertel: —recipe columns.

[0:10:55.9]

Jessica B. Harris: No, not at all, not at all, not writing recipe *at all*.

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Rien Fertel: Interesting.

[0:10:59.0]

Jessica B. Harris: And I had early on—how did that happen now? Somehow or other, I had proposed a book on my—the women’s beauty secret book, that was purchased, that then got orphaned. I don’t know if you know the term, but when your editor goes away and nobody else kind of wants the book. And so on the day that I turned in the manuscript, much to my great chagrin and dismay, I was told they weren’t going to publish it. So I tucked my tail between my legs and had my manuscript, and, by that time, had an agent as well, and had finished my dissertation, and sort of sat down with the agent, and we’re like, “Okay. What are we going to do now?”

And so I said, “Well, maybe I’ll write a cookbook or something.”

“About what?”

“Well, maybe about food made with peppers and chiles from around the world, or something.”

So that's how *Hot Stuff*, which is actually the first book, got published, got purchased and published, because she sold it. It was back in the [19]70s when you could do those things with a greater degree of facility than nowadays. And that's how it started. But what I determined was I was writing, yes, recipe, but more importantly, I was researching. I was sort of pulling together all of those threads from the travel, from the food. I read Marco Polo's journals, I read Columbus' journals, I read all of that, so it was a very different kind of cookbook, I guess, when it came out, because people were not so much doing that in the States back then, I don't think.

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Rien Fertel: With kind of thick description, as an anthropologist would call it, which is going deeper than the recipe, telling stories, history.

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Jessica B. Harris: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So that's kind of how it started, and it sold well enough to make out its advance, which meant they were predisposed to doing another book, and that one was *Iron Pots & Wooden Spoons*, which then became the book that started the journey that continues to this day.

[0:13:36.6]

Rien Fertel: Well, tell me about that book. It's a—I have it right here. So I'd call it—it's a slim volume, but it is just packed. There's a density to it because you cover a lot of ground.

[0:13:53.6]

Jessica B. Harris: Well, a lot of the ground that I cover in that goes back to *Essence*, because what happened was, as travel editor for *Essence*, I got to do things like—my doctorate is on the French-speaking theatre of Senegal, so I'd been up and down the West African coast, because I was originally going to do it on the French-speaking theatre of West Africa, and then clearly it became obvious that was too broad.

I had been to Morocco. I had been, certainly, to most of Western Europe. With *Essence*, I started going to the Caribbean. Actually, before *Essence*, I started going to the Caribbean, but I went more with *Essence*. I went to Barbados and, I guess, Martinique, Guadalupe, those places, and I went to Bahia in South America, so that on all of those stops, as you eat, you sort of get this, for want of a term, memory bank of things that are then connecting, and you feel like dots are connecting, and, “I tasted this before or tasted something like this, or I've seen something like this, or this looks like the thing that I saw in the market two months ago,” and that basically was the genesis of *Iron Pots*.

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Rien Fertel: During all these travels, were you taking notes on food beyond what you needed for the articles?

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Jessica B. Harris: No, no. I am blessed with my father's memory, and my father had an ability to read something and recall it fifteen years later when he needed it exactly as—I

mean without any variation of it, and I'm kind of blessed with my dad's memory in that sense that I can kind of call things up and then recreate them and have a sense of what it is. It's the same thing, people say, "Did you have any, journals or anything about the memoir?" It's like, "No." I did manage to find one Day At-a-Glance for just one year of that whole period, but that's pretty much it. It's just that stuff sort of stays with me.

[0:16:17.6]

Rien Fertel: And so your next book, you moved to the Caribbean. That's *Sky Juice and Flying Fish*, is that right?

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Jessica B. Harris: Yeah. Then it was *Sky Juice and Flying Fish*, then it was *Tasting Brazil*.

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Rien Fertel: Right. Okay.

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Jessica B. Harris: Right. So *Sky Juice and Flying Fish*, ironically, is still in print.

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Rien Fertel: Why do you think that is?

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Jessica B. Harris: Well, I mean, I think it—well, for many years back there, certainly with those books, I was *way* in front of the curve. There were a couple of people who had also begun to talk about the food of the African diaspora, Helen Mendes, and I've forgotten what it's called, but it's *African Heritage Cookbook* or something like that.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah, it's, like, an orange volume, I believe.

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Jessica B. Harris: I don't know.

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Rien Fertel: Maybe.

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Jessica B. Harris: And then Vertamae Grosvenor, who—but even then, I think the initial *Vibration Cooking* is a very different volume and version from what the current one is, and I don't remember it as being so diaspora-driven, but that may just have been my not thinking of it in those terms. But those are probably the only two folks out there that were writing food-related stuff that way. And then again, those were the only two volumes of that kind of thing that they did. So that's part of what happened. So I was kind of like the visionary, the pepper book just before everybody got pepper crazy.

[0:18:07.3]

Rien Fertel: Right, yeah.

[0:18:07.6]

Jessica B. Harris: Just before, just far enough before to not hit that curve.

[0:18:12.9]

Rien Fertel: There's a hundred books about peppers written by—

[0:18:14.6]

Jessica B. Harris: Oh, no, now, I mean, and Dave DeWitt came out with a—I was talking to somebody yesterday—with a chile pepper magazine and all of that, but I was just before that, just a little bit before that. And everybody else, of course, made money.

The same with the Caribbean. That's one that kind of hit. It was just beginning to come in, and, interestingly enough, it's something that I thought I would take a lot of hits from in the Caribbean, but when I was going down there and I did some consulting for a hotel chain called Almond Resorts in Barbados originally, but then in Barbados and St. Lucia—and I spoke for many years, and I'm a founding member of the Caribbean Culinary Federation—somebody said to me, “But, Jessica, no. I can talk about the food from where I'm from, but I can't overview it.” And so that was the value of that book, in a way, was that it did an overview of the Caribbean. It wasn't necessarily the definitive

work on Puerto Rico or Jamaica or anywhere else, but it gave a sense of the islands and the diversity of the islands and their food. So that was that one.

And then there was *Tasting Brazil*, which I think—I'm not sure—might have been the first Brazilian cookbook in English. If it wasn't, it's the second or third. There weren't a lot of them.

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Rien Fertel: Had you spent a lot of time in country?

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Jessica B. Harris: Actually, at that period, I was going some kind of frequency, but I hadn't spent that much time there, but the time that I had spent had been well spent. I met Jorge Amado, you know?

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Rien Fertel: Who was that?

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Jessica B. Harris: Jorge Amado was the guy who wrote *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, and he was—at some point, there were people who thought he should have been Brazil's Nobel Laureate for Literature. He did a whole series of books that captured, particularly of Bahia, of a certain period.

Carybé, this is his book here. I don't think this is the one—no, it's probably not the one—who was actually an Argentinian artist, but who drew Bahia and who documented Bahia, the Bahia particularly of Candomblé, Candomblé being the Afro-Brazilian religion that's a little bit Yoruba and a little bit Fon and Ewe. So he did things that are like classic—

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Rien Fertel: Oh, those are beautiful.

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Jessica B. Harris: —unbelievably amazing drawings of life in the religious houses.

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Rien Fertel: So what first brought you to Brazil?

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Jessica B. Harris: Travel.

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Rien Fertel: It was just travel?

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Jessica B. Harris: Travel writing. I was on a press trip to Brazil—

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Rien Fertel: Those are gorgeous.

[0:21:31.9]

Jessica B. Harris: —and got off in Brazil, and it was like, “Oh, my Lord. Look at this world here.” But I did an article on Bahia for—I guess I did one for *Vogue*, I think. I did one certainly for *Essence*. But that was in the early [19]80s, it must have been, and that was before Bahia hit, before people started going to Bahia and all of that, so I was very fortunate in being able to meet and to be in Bahia at a time that no longer exists. I mean, that’s, if anything, the uniqueness of what I’ve done is I’ve been lucky enough—it’s that part of the book where I talk about being the Zelig. I really was there in those times that even the people from there look back on with nostalgia.

I mean, I was in Senegal when there was incredible hope, when all sorts of things were going on. I spoke fluent French, so I could actually talk with people. But I went to Senegal for the first time in—I think it was 1972. Might have been [19]70, but it was either [19]70 or [19]72, and met people. I was researching my dissertation. They had a national theatre that was a vibrant company. It was run by Senghor’s nephew, Sonar Senghor. They had done all kinds of incredible plays. There was a cultural life that was amazing. People had another kind of thing. When I got to—and [19]70 was, what, basically four years after what would have been the *Festival mondial des arts nègres*, which would have been one of the crucible moments for black arts.

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Rien Fertel: In Africa or in the Atlantic?

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Jessica B. Harris: In the Atlantic World, I mean because it was the first real kind of get-together assembly of people from the United States, from the African countries, from the Caribbean, from Brazil, all together celebrating black art. So it was what became FESTAC. And then in [19]77, there was another one in Nigeria, and there may have been subsequent ones, but I don't know, but the first one was in Senegal in [19]66. I think it's [19]66, pretty sure. So that all of that was a certain kind of excitement. The excitement, also we forget that these countries were just coming out of colonialism in the [19]60s, so that there was that kind of excitement as well, people running their own places. So I got to be there for a lot of that.

So I was in Pelourinho. Pelourinho was the old square of the pillory, and it used to be the red-light down-and-dirty district of Bahia, and people would—there were streets you didn't walk down. And so people would say—I remember one year I gave a going-away party for some friends that I had met in Bahia or whatever and the people that I knew in Bahia, and I gave it a place that was called the Cantina da Lua, which is the Canteen of the Moon. And it was just a little tiny place on a corner where it looked out over one of the squares. I've forgotten what the name of the square was, but I have to look it up because I will probably be writing about this in the next thing I hope to do. And the guy who owned it was a very tall, very, very elegant man named Clarindo Silva, who was always dressed in white because he was a votary, if you will, of the Yoruba, Orisha,

Obatala, Oshanla, and so he always wore white. But at midnight, he would read poetry over a loudspeaker to the square. So it was that kind of madness and that kind of thing that went on.

And you could get a really good meal, and a bottle of cachaça was twenty-five cents. So it was pretty incredible. I almost bought a house in Bahia. I wish I had. It was going to be \$4,000, back in the—that was probably in the [19]70s, early [19]80s, or something like that. So that’s what that Brazil book grew out of, in that sense, knowing those folks and meeting those people and really making friends and finding—in a way, finding family, making family. So it was that kind of thing. And then after that, I don’t remember what the next book was, but it was probably—

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Rien Fertel: Well, *The World Beauty Book* came out in [19]95, three years after *Tasting Brazil*, and then *The Welcome Table* also came out in [19]95.

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Jessica B. Harris: Yeah. There were three books in [19]95, because *A Kwanzaa Keepsake* was also [19]95.

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Rien Fertel: And *Kwanzaa Keepsake*, yeah. Well, I want to ask one more question about—so when I was in graduate school a decade ago doing my dissertation, the hip topic in humanities in American universities, graduate school universities, was the

Atlantic World, also called the Black Atlantic, and to read the historiography, the articles coming out, it was as if this thing had been discovered just in 2000, maybe the [19]90s, according to these scholars, is when it was being written about.

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Jessica B. Harris: That's probably what the reality was. I mean—

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Rien Fertel: But weren't you writing about it and—

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Jessica B. Harris: I was writing about food. Certainly I'd talk about it—in terms of *Iron Pots*, it's—the introduction to *Iron Pots* certainly defines in a kind of very sort of loosey-goosey way what that world was, but I think that people come to it when they come to it. And people disregard cookbooks, so that wasn't something that they were thinking about or reading. And if they were, it was somewhere else in their brain. It wasn't, "Oh, this is text." It was, "Oh, that's cookbook." The thing that happens to cookbook authors is very interesting. I only really know it now because of having written a non-cookbook, and it's a very different way that people approach you and that you are considered.

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Rien Fertel: How so?

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Jessica B. Harris: One, I think, people somehow or other don't consider cookbooks to be serious.

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Rien Fertel: You're a "writer" now. Is that what it is?

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Jessica B. Harris: Well, yeah, I am, I mean, and I probably feel it a little differently, too, because, I mean, it's all about—it's about recipe, and part of the thing about recipe is it takes up a lot of cookbook space. If you're writing a cookbook, you've got to have a recipe or two or five or twenty or whatever, and I'm one of those people who came into the field when a cookbook had two hundred recipes. Nowadays, a cookbook has seventy-five, maybe, so it's a very different field, again, and then there's all of this other stuff that has come along with it with, the recipe testers and the food stylists.

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Rien Fertel: Were you testing your recipes back then?

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Jessica B. Harris: I was testing them, but *I* was testing them, and I was testing them in my kitchen, in my manner, knowing what I was trying to get, so they weren't

professionally tested per se. And some people may have a problem with that, but they captured the time and they captured the food.

But, I mean, I think that that approach to cookbook authors is always interesting. I mean, and it was very much—certainly when I came into it, people were serious about it. There were any number of really serious people working, and still are, but it was also one of those things that has never been lucrative. I think that’s the big surprise for people, is unless you are independently wealthy and living on your income, don’t go into writing food. It’s not gonna do that. And people see *x* or *y* and think, “Oh, my, must be doing this, that, or the other,” but, I mean, honestly, unless you’re somebody like John T., it ain’t working. It ain’t working for the rest of us that way, you know? So a lot of the early cookbook writers, certainly in New York, were doctors’ wives and people who were doing that. They weren’t people—I was working full-time through all of this.

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Rien Fertel: As a professor?

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Jessica B. Harris: As a professor, as a full-time professor with maybe a side gig or two, keeping it all together. And there were no Julia Child Foundation grants, so it was all self-supported.

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Rien Fertel: Speaking of credibility that cookbook authors have, was that ever a problem in your department or at the college?

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Jessica B. Harris: Ironically, no. No. I mean, my college got it, in a way, but they got it as journalism, I think, more than as cookbook. In fact, I'm constantly being told how dumb I am about myself, and I suspect that's the way I'm gonna die, because it's not changing at this point. But someone at my college—and I teach in a special program, which is definitely a Rodney Dangerfield “Doesn't get any respect and should” program, the SEEK Program, which has an extraordinary history and has an extraordinary set of graduates, but that gets little respect on Queens College campus, *very* little. And as I leave Queens College, I look back and go, “Hmm, I'm not sure. I'm not sure I'd do it again that same way.” I mean, it afforded me the possibility of doing all sorts of things, but it was not—what shall we say? It was rewarding in terms of students. It wasn't necessarily rewarding in terms of all of the academic stuff.

[0:33:23.8]

Rien Fertel: Why didn't it get respect? Was it nontraditional students?

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Jessica B. Harris: Nontraditional students, mainly African-American teachers. That's the kiss of death. And, in some cases, nontraditional teachers. But I did the traditional path. I got a doctorate from NYU, I have a Master's from Queens College itself, and I

have a *licence ès lettres* from the Université de Nancy in Nancy, France, so that was pretty impeccable. It wasn't very much they could do or say about that.

But literally somebody in the English department said to me, "I think you really should put yourself up for—" I don't even remember what it was. I think I went up automatically for tenure, but then I was an assistant professor. He was like, "No, you need to put yourself up for full professor."

And I remember going over to see the dean, who was like, "Well, you know, nobody ever really gets it on the first try, so don't be worried if you don't get—" And I was like—it went through.

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Rien Fertel: And when was this?

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Jessica B. Harris: Oh, god, so long ago I don't remember. Probably in the [19]90s. I really don't remember. I could look it up if you need to know—

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Rien Fertel: No.

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Jessica B. Harris: —but so it was kind of like boom, boom, boom. But, I mean, every time I went, I would be taking these huge bankers boxes full of articles and books, and

somebody finally said, “Oh, this is a body of work. This is a real body of work.” So that’s how it happened.

[0:35:15.4]

Rien Fertel: Were you afraid that because it was cookbook writing and food writing and travel writing, that it would not be acknowledged?

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Jessica B. Harris: I had no idea what they would do, but, I mean, the fact that someone from the department proposed me and said, “And the department will support you,” it’s like at that point, you do it.

[0:35:33.7]

Rien Fertel: In the [19]90s, or even today, you were publishing these kind of monumental, I think of them as now, because they’re so full of history and information and recipes, because cookbooks had so many hundreds of recipes back then, kind of back to back, year after year. How did you stay prolific like that? How did you work?

[0:35:56.7]

Jessica B. Harris: I just—my standard sort of flip answer is overactive thyroid, no social life. **[Fertel laughs]** I have no idea. I never—I’m not prolific to myself. I’m always beating myself—I mean, for example, here I’m like, “Oh, my God. You need to do—.” I’ve got a list of three or four things that I really should do that I haven’t done. I mean,

I've got one essay. It's a twenty-page essay, for God sakes. I just held up a publication of a book for about three years. It's like, "Write the damn essay." I've got ten pages of it already, but it's like I don't think of that. I really don't think of it in that sense. And then life happens. Things intervene. But I think that, as you get older, you begin to hear time's winged chariot, so I will be finishing that essay and doing other stuff.

[0:37:07.2]

Rien Fertel: Well, when you were writing these cookbooks and cooking all this food, testing it, were you cooking it for people?

[0:37:14.7]

Jessica B. Harris: In some cases, I was cooking for friends. My mother was my go-to person. My mother was actually a trained dietitian, and so, in some cases, she would test a recipe for me and say, "You know, you need to do this," or, "Had you thought about doing that?" or, "Add this," or, "Move that." And she was impeccable, so she was kind of like my ace in the hole until 2000, and then after 2000 when she died, I don't even remember how many books I've published since 2000, but probably that was some of the thing that was veering into another kind of world.

But, yeah, no, no, no, I used to entertain often. I entertain now a lot less frequently, but I'm hoping to get back into entertaining. I have so much that I've got to organize in my life, I mean, which is—when you get to the point where you start to think of legacy and you don't have any kids, it becomes another set of issues. How do you do that? What do you do with that? Where would you like things to be if they could be

where you'd like them to be? How do you sustain something? What goes on? Bonnie Slotnick came over to my house, oh, maybe a month or two ago just to look—because I wanted her to come and look at the cookbooks because I wanted to talk to her about them, and she just sort of said, “Well, you’ve got about 3,500 cookbooks.”

[0:38:52.9]

Rien Fertel: In your apartment in Brooklyn?

[0:38:55.9]

Jessica B. Harris: It’s a house, and that’s the thing, and it’s like, yeah, and I do. And she didn’t see all of them, so I probably have 4,000, and I’ve got some here and I’ve got some on the Vineyard, so I may have 4,500 cookbooks. I think of it as a collection. I mean, and some of them—that was what—she went into one room and said, “Oh, my God, I have never heard of these books.” But I am somewhat acquisitive by nature, and so when I was traveling back in those places, back in those days, if there was a cookbook, I bought it and I brought it home and I kept it. I’m an only child, so I’m pretty good with my stuff.

So, I mean, I not only have cookbooks. I have dresses from the *cuisiniers*, who were the women cooks. It was a sort of self-help organization. I was certainly the first, maybe the only American, to be a member of the Association de Cuisiniers for several years, and every year, they have the Fait de Cuisiniers in Guadalupe. I used to get dressed and go on down to it. But every year, they get one—I’m thinking in French now, sorry. They get one fabric and everybody gets a dress made out of that fabric, so I’ve got three

or four years of those dresses. I've got—anyhow, lots and lots of stuff. And my retirement plan is to leave New York, interestingly, and move down here.

[0:40:40.0]

Rien Fertel: I want to ask you a question about that, but I want to say just to put it on record I want to volunteer, and I don't know who's going to help you move out of your office on the campus, but I will go up to New York and stay however long it needs. I'll stay with my uncle. If you need someone, I will do it. **[Laughter]** I want to volunteer. I think it would be—

[0:41:00.2]

Jessica B. Harris: Baby, you be afraid what you're asking for.

[0:41:01.4]

Rien Fertel: I think I would learn a lot.

[0:41:02.3]

Jessica B. Harris: No, no, no. I'm serious, Rien. Be afraid what you're asking for, because this has to happen.

[0:41:07.6]

Rien Fertel: Okay. I don't know who you have, but we'll talk about it after.

[0:41:11.0]

Jessica B. Harris: I don't know who I have either. I know that there's several people who are saying they want to, but you will definitely go on the list—

[0:41:17.7]

Rien Fertel: Okay. I'd love to.

[0:41:18.9]

Jessica B. Harris: —because I know you've got a place to stay and I know you love stuff and books in a way that I do.

[0:41:23.8]

Rien Fertel: I do, and I like packing. I've done a lot of it, oh, since—for the past ten years.

I have two questions in mind right now. When you were beginning your cookbook career in the [19]80s and [19]90s, was there an ideal cookbook that you wanted to replicate? Maybe it wasn't even a cookbook, but was there something?

[0:41:42.4]

Jessica B. Harris: No. I just stumbled along blindly. There was no plan. There was *really* no plan. I mean, I have no idea why or how I even got into cookbooks. It just happened, in that sense, with that sort of random trajectory.

One of the things that I am fascinated by—and I am very friendly with Nicole Taylor and people of your and her generation, and I’m fascinated by your sense of purpose. For us, we just sort of went along, sort of loosey-goosey, hippie-dippie. I had a job, so I can’t say that I was loosey-goosey, hippie-dippie to that point, but knowing that it was going to be cookbooks and that cookbooks—at some point, yes.

Nancy Harmon Jenkins did an article. She was doing a series called “Cooks on the Map,” and when *Iron Pots* came out, she literally came to Brooklyn, I cooked a meal, she had dinner with me and my mother and wrote an article about it and called me a food historian, and at some point that was the beginning of the whole thing. I always sort of say sort of like the—what is it—John in the Bible, “In the beginning was the Word.”

[0:43:05.4]

Rien Fertel: Where was that published?

[0:43:06.1]

Jessica B. Harris: In the *New York Times*?

[0:43:07.3]

Rien Fertel: In the *New York Times*. Okay.

[0:43:09.2]

Jessica B. Harris: And that was my entrée into the big time, if you will, of cooking, because then there was another article. One Christmas, the *New York Times* decided it

wanted to put together a hypothetical family, so it was me—I think we did it at—oh, God, I’m going to blank on her name too. Come on, Jessica. You’ve really got to do better than this. Not Rosie Schaap. That’s my confusion. Brother was a baseball player, somewhat ill now. Did Eat and Scribble [*sic* CookNScribble]. Molly O’Neill. It just takes a while. But anyhow, we did it at Molly O’Neill’s house. It was Julia Child and me and two or three other people, and they had us cook a Christmas dinner.

[0:44:11.9]

Rien Fertel: All women?

[0:44:12.7]

Jessica B. Harris: No, no, no, there were a couple of guys. Richard Grausman, I think, was one of them. He’s done a lot of work with students and French cuisine and students, nontraditional students in New York, and I think he was part of that dysfunctional family. But it was—so, I mean, that was when people began to hear about me.

And for years, Daphne Derven—you know Daphne—well, Daphne and I used to go to IACP and we would be roommates. I mean, some people sort of said, “Oh, my God. We thought you were a lesbian couple.”

It was like, “No, we’re just friends and roommates.”

So we did at least ten years of IACP that way. That was back in the days of the AIWF. I was a national board member of the AIWF. In fact, that’s what I did for—that’s what Daphne and I did for John T.

[0:45:12.2]

Rien Fertel: What was the AIWF?

[0:45:13.6]

Jessica B. Harris: American Institute of Wine & Food. And it was sort of run by Julia Child. You're checking your tape. It's not tape, is it?

[0:45:24.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, no, just making sure it's running.

[0:45:25.7]

Jessica B. Harris: Run by Julia Child and Robert Mondavi. And so I became a national board member of it. It was at a point where the IACP was meaningful in ways that I don't think very much of anything is nowadays. I mean, it was just at that tipping point before it got so over the top that it was just like—but, no, that was how people began to know me, if you will, because it was either Vertamae—and she didn't do that—or it was me, and we were the only two black people working in food.

[0:46:16.7]

Rien Fertel: Well, you mentioned people my age and how singularly focused we can be, and this question's going to be a bit of a pushback, but did you not see what you were doing as singularly focused? Or even did you ever think of yourself and what you were

doing and documenting these foodways, kind of these lines and threads across the Atlantic, as revolutionary?

[0:46:39.0]

Jessica B. Harris: Nope.

[0:46:40.2]

Rien Fertel: No?

[0:46:42.3]

Jessica B. Harris: No, nope. It was, and is, a passion, but I had no idea. And I'm not being disingenuous. I really don't think I had any idea that, at this stage now, looking back, people would go, "Oh, my God. That was—," whatever. No, I had no idea. Not a clue. No, no. And still I'm kind of gobsmacked when people go, "My God." It's like, "Really?"

[0:47:16.8]

Rien Fertel: You mentioned perhaps relocating to New Orleans full-time. What first brought you—

[0:47:25.1]

Jessica B. Harris: Well, not full-time.

[0:47:25.9]

Rien Fertel: Oh, okay, but out of New York.

[0:47:27.8]

Jessica B. Harris: No, well, I have a house on Martha's Vineyard, so it would be New Orleans, Martha's Vineyard, and here when I don't want to be there and there when I don't want to be here. In terms of climate, that works, because I don't ever want to be down here after June—

[0:47:41.0]

Rien Fertel: It's tough.

[0:47:42.4]

Jessica B. Harris: —and I don't ever want to be up there after October.

[0:47:45.8]

Rien Fertel: What brought you here first?

[0:47:48.0]

Jessica B. Harris: Very, very first, *Essence*. My first trip to New Orleans, great irony, great, great irony. You'll understand in a minute. Back in those days, *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* magazine all did college issues, so I got sent down to New Orleans with a team to work on a college issue for *Essence*, and the college was Dillard.

[0:48:15.4]

Rien Fertel: And what year was this?

[0:48:16.7]

Jessica B. Harris: Well, it was in the [19]70s. I was out of *Essence* by early [19]80s.

[0:48:21.1]

Rien Fertel: Wow. Yeah, okay. And what do you remember—do you remember that trip or your impressions?

[0:48:26.1]

Jessica B. Harris: I remember the trip. I remember going to Dooky Chase. Dooky's was, at that point, probably just a little sandwich shop, but I went there. I made a friend who's become a lifelong friend. Her name is Elaine Evans, and she was the hairdresser. And Elaine, we've sort of followed each other. She ended up in Abidjan, and we connected in Abidjan. She ended up in Paris. She was actually the hairdresser for Givenchy when he had his *Cabine noire*, so we ended up together in Paris. She is now still in Senegal. She's changed her name to Kadijah and is living in Senegal. But we sort of hung out together. We went to Dooky Chase's. I don't remember where else we went, but I do remember that we went to Dooky's.

I vaguely remember the campus, but not really. I ran into—I remembered the name of somebody who had been on the campus side when I came to Dillard, lo those

many years after, but I don't remember her name now. But that was the irony, and that was the first thing. It was a city that I knew I would like.

And then I came back again, I guess just after my father died, which would have been [19]85, and I came back for an MLA conference. I knew I wanted to come. The College Language Association, of which I am a life member—need to give them some money again. Well, I bought my life membership when I was thirty, so I am not a good investment for them, because they keep sending me the magazine, and I need to send them something.

But anyhow, I came down that time, and on the plane—*Town & Country* magazine back in those days used to do a series of little short vignettes, “Buffy Does Boston” and “Muffy Does Maryland” or whatever. And somebody was doing New Orleans, and it was just after, I guess, *Hot Stuff* had come out on paperback, I think. So I'd already gotten one or maybe two books. I don't think *Iron Pots* was out, but *Hot Stuff* was out at that point. And one of the shops that Biffy, Muffy, or whatever her name was stopped at was Lucullus culinary antiques shop.

[0:51:08.1]

Rien Fertel: I didn't know it was that old. Okay.

[0:51:08.7]

Jessica B. Harris: Oh, yeah. And it was like, “Oh, my god, culinary antiques shop. I've got to go in there.” So I went flying in there, and Patrick [Dunne] was there, and Patrick and I sort of took one look at each other and decided we'd kind of been separated at birth.

And Kerry [Moody] and I, ditto. I think I met his sister on that trip or something. But that must have been in [19]86 or something like that. And that was when it was like, “Okay, this is a place that I love.” At that point, I remember going with somebody and having, you know, lunch at Galatoire’s, and I’d met Patrick and Kerry.

Then I just sort of started—they invited me back to something. Let me get this right. They invited me back to speak for the Grima House, and that’s how I met Daphne, because Daphne had been involved with the restoration of the kitchens at the Grima House. And so meeting Daphne—and my mother and I met Daphne at the same point. It was a conference that was being given at the Grima House, and I think Patrick was involved with it, and at some point I said, “Well, you need to invite Leah Chase and make sure that she comes and speaks.” So it’s kind of one of the first occasions on which she came downtown to the Grima House crowd in another kind of way. We’re talking the [19]80s again. And then from there, I made all sorts of friends.

[0:52:46.8]

Rien Fertel: And was your connection to the city because of its connections to Africa, Caribbean, and France?

[0:52:55.8]

Jessica B. Harris: Probably at that point I was maybe more thinking France and French and certainly Africa, and by the [19]80s, I was already getting involved in Candomblé and knowing more than most folks think I do about stuff like that. And that’s kind of how

it happened. I remember I bought a Brazilian friend up for—or down, I guess—for one of the Tomato Festivals, when they were doing things.

One of the people that I met through the Grima House stuff was Louis Costa and Mary Len Costa, who become—in fact, having lunch with them on Sunday. They are now officially my New Orleans family kind of thing, and I’ve known them ever since them. A lady named Gail McDonough, who I’m still close with. But that’s how that one happened.

And then they invited me back to—what was it—the Tomato Festival, and I invited a Brazilian lady, and all sorts of madness happened that year. In fact, that’s a story that’s in the book that Rosemary, Rosemary [James] from Faulkner House, Joe DeSalvo’s wife—

[0:54:28.2]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, Rosemary—

[0:54:29.3]

Jessica B. Harris: Yeah, anyhow—

[0:54:29.9]

Rien Fertel: I forget her last name, yeah. **[Laughter]**

[0:54:31.3]

Jessica B. Harris: Well, there you go. It's not just me. But Rosemary did a book right after Katrina, and she asked me to do an essay, and the essay is written in the style of Jorge Amado, but about taking Oya, who is the Yoruba goddess of the cemeteries, to see Marie Laveau's tomb. So that was one of those *strange* occurrences that happened at the French Market, so you can read the story and we can talk about that at some other point.

[0:55:03.2]

Rien Fertel: I will. I just have one or two more questions.

[0:55:06.3]

Jessica B. Harris: Sure.

[0:55:06.7]

Rien Fertel: Did you always want to write the memoir you wrote—

[0:55:10.9]

Jessica B. Harris: No.

[0:55:11.9]

Rien Fertel: —and did you wait to a certain time?

[0:55:13.0]

Jessica B. Harris: Oh, God, no. I had no idea. That was totally by accident again.

[0:55:17.4]

Rien Fertel: Was it an agent that asked you to—

[0:55:19.1]

Jessica B. Harris: No, no, no. It was my editor. When Maya [Angelou] died, I think Kim Severson may have known that I knew Maya, or we might have been talking about something totally unrelated, and I said, “Oh, my God. Maya’s died.” Or she might have been asking about obit stuff, and she said, “Well, did you ever cook with her?”

I said, “Well, yeah. As a matter of fact, I did.”

So I did an article about cooking with Maya that came out shortly after she died. And I was sitting, batting book ideas back and forth with my agent, who was like, “Well—.”

And then at just the end of the conversation, she was like, “Well, you know, did you see the article I wrote?”

She said, “No, I didn’t.” She said, “I didn’t know you—.” She said, “Well, I think that’s your next book.”

And that’s how that one happened. Yeah, so that’s kind of how that one happened.

[0:56:16.3]

Rien Fertel: Would you write a follow-up memoir? Do you want to?

[0:56:22.6]

Jessica B. Harris: I hope to. I want to—I'm actually working on a proposal for that right now—

[0:56:26.5]

Rien Fertel: Excellent.

[0:56:26.5]

Jessica B. Harris: —and it's called *Compass Points*. And there's a very lengthy subtitle, *Or the Peripatetic—no. Or the Picaresque Journey—Or My Picaresque Journey Toward Making Family and Becoming the Heroine of My Own Life*, or something generally like that, and the idea would be it would talk about France in another kind of way, including that family that I was talking about, the young lady who was just here. And Bahia, talk about the family that I've made there, talk about the family that I made in Africa and in the Caribbean, and then probably end in New Orleans. And then there's another one that I want to do, which will be three, and that's it. I'm not going to be Maya. There are not going to be millions of them.

[0:57:19.9]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter] Can you say what the—

[0:57:21.1]

Jessica B. Harris: But the other one is probably going to be called *With Luck: South to Home*, just to mess with all those Willie Morris people.

[0:57:29.9]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter] About your time here?

[0:57:33.4]

Jessica B. Harris: About discovering the South and finding my way South, because I'm a Northerner, but I'm a Northerner who is completely and totally more at home in the South than in the North.

[0:57:47.0]

Rien Fertel: Do you think—I know you have a lot of fans. I think you have a lot of followers or people you've inspired in—

[0:57:58.2]

Jessica B. Harris: You do, do you?

[0:57:59.7]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter] I know you do. Do you think about your legacy? Does it affect you? Does it embarrass you?

[0:58:07.6]

Jessica B. Harris: Well, no. I mean, I don't—two things. I don't really think I know what my legacy is. That's for starters. Scott Barton said something interesting. Scott teaches as an adjunct at Queens College, and he was saying, "You know, I know they're not going to do the right thing," he said, "but I really think that after your retirement, that I would like to try to find a way to do a daylong conference on your work."

And it's like, "Really?" I mean, I'm saying it now, getting ready to cry. I was so gobsmacked by that, it was like, "Really? My work? A conference? The subject of—ooh. Okay." And that's—again, I'm not—I don't know that me, and I think I've made a conscious effort not to know that me because I know that I have hidden wellsprings of potential arrogance that could be really, really, really, really bad if I knew that me. So I don't want to know that me. I want that me to just be that, whatever that is, because I think that if you know it, at some point then you use it. I don't ever want to use it. So I don't know that one.

[0:59:33.1]

Rien Fertel: But you'd accept it, you'd embrace it?

[0:59:37.3]

Jessica B. Harris: Oh, yeah. No, no, no. I would go.

[0:59:39.2]

Rien Fertel: You would go. All right. **[Laughter]**

[0:59:41.0]

Jessica B. Harris: I would be tickled. I would be curious to see what people said. I would be interested. I mean, I've read once somebody in England wrote about *A Kwanzaa Keepsake*, and it was a simple book. I left blank pages because I wanted it to be a keepsake, but there is this long, multipage dissertation on the use of white space and blank—it's like, "Really? That's what you thought?" It's like, "I wanted people to be able to write in the damn book."

[1:00:13.8]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter] That's interesting. Right.

[1:00:16.4]

Jessica B. Harris: Yeah, so what people see in you has not necessarily anything to do with what your intent was, so it's always interesting to see what people thought you said as opposed to what you thought you said.

[1:00:28.8]

Rien Fertel: All right. So that directly leads to my next question, and I might be reading too much into this, like perhaps the scholar in the *Kwanzaa Keepsake*, but I was looking through all of your books over the past week, and almost in every acknowledgement, the acknowledgements end with—

[1:00:45.1]

Jessica B. Harris: Oh, and the person that I've left out?

[1:00:47.7]

Rien Fertel: No, no, no. It says something—the final thank you, the final acknowledgement is always to the—it's something along the lines, “To the Supreme Creator. Without Him, nothing would ever be written by me,” is what you write. But in your last book, in your memoir, you change it, and I want to know if there's a reason or if I'm just reading into it, but you name the Creator as—

[1:01:10.0]

Jessica B. Harris: What do I say?

[1:01:10.4]

Rien Fertel: —as “Finally, all praises are due the Lord Orisha.” Am I pronouncing that right?

[1:01:15.4]

Jessica B. Harris: Mm-hmm.

[1:01:15.9]

Rien Fertel: “And creative spirits who keep the ink flowing. I am grateful to all.”

[1:01:20.8]

Jessica B. Harris: It's the same thing.

[1:01:22.3]

Rien Fertel: It's the same thing? Is that—okay.

[1:01:23.9]

Jessica B. Harris: I mean, Supreme Being, the Lord Orisha, Creative Spirits—

[1:01:28.8]

Rien Fertel: All the same?

[1:01:30.1]

Jessica B. Harris: It's all the same. It's always all been the same. It's not like there's a change.

[1:01:36.1]

Rien Fertel: Sure, sure, sure.

[1:01:37.4]

Jessica B. Harris: It's just thanking that that is bigger than me that makes me do this or lets me do this. That's all. Nothing more in that, or at least nothing more that I know of.

[1:01:53.4]

Rien Fertel: Do you think you'll keep on writing? Do you think you'll ever retire from writing?

[1:01:57.9]

Jessica B. Harris: I hope not. Yeah, I want to do—I've got two books that I really want to start working on. Well, three if you count that *South to Home*. But I really want to do the *Compass Points* because I want to—. *My Soul Looks Back* is a very finite story that actually was happening during some of the time that the *Compass Points* stories were happening, but people are—I mean, not that it sold that many copies. The four people who've read it are saying things like, "It's a time period." It's like, no, this is a narrative that weaves in and out of time, and the other things happened.

I think the other thing that I want to do is I want to do an Afro-Hispanic cookbook because I don't think anybody has really looked at that, and it would allow me to look at South America, which I've never really looked at.

And the proverbial God, Spirit, Life, Breath, and all the rest of that, I would like to do a cookbook looking at East Africa moving east, because people don't really talk about that either, but what are those connections between those foods and the dhow trade? What about how did that coffee get to Yemen? How did all of that stuff happen? And then I've always been curious as opposed to why Melanesia is called Melanesia.

[1:03:39.0]

Rien Fertel: I'm not sure I even know where Melanesia is.

[1:03:41.3]

Jessica B. Harris: It's like Fiji, Micronesia and all of that. I have a friend who was born in Fiji, used to always say, Fiji was very like Africa to him—very like the Caribbean. He didn't know Africa at that point, but very like the Caribbean, and their markets are the same. Markets in Asia tend to be up, markets there are down, on the dirt, whatever. Anyhow, I'd be curious—I don't know that part of the world at all, but I'd be curious to see what's over there. So I'm still curious.

[1:04:13.2]

Rien Fertel: Well, I look forward to them all. **[Laughter]**

[1:04:15.8]

Jessica B. Harris: Let us pray.

[1:04:17.2]

Rien Fertel: Well, thank you. Thanks for sitting down and talking.

[1:04:20.6]

Jessica B. Harris: Thank you.

[End of interview]