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## Interview with Anita Hoffman

Anita Hoffman

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #236  
HOFFMAN, Anita

**HOFFMAN, Anita**

Anti-war activist, feminist, poverty awareness activist, scholar

*Interviewed:* November 28, 1992

*Interviewer:* Ron Chepesiuk

*Index by:* Alyssa Jones

*Length:* 1 hour, 50 minutes, 7 seconds

Abstract: In her November 1992 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Anita Hoffman detailed her experiences in the 1960s and her time with her ex-husband, Abbie Hoffman. Hoffman, aside from speaking about her ex-husband, covered such topics as poverty, racism, the Weathermen (Weather Underground), the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Women's Liberation, and the Youth International Party. Hoffman also discussed sexism, mental illness, in reference to Abbie and her studies as a Psychology major, the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings, and the technology revolution. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: New York Civil Liberties Union, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), World's Fair, Liberty House, Abbie Hoffman, poverty, racism, sexism, mental illness, manic-depressive, Robin Morgan, Women's Liberation, Eldridge Cleaver (and Algeria), Yippies (Youth International Party), Weathermen, Chicago Conspiracy Trial, Tim Leary, Paul Krassner, Jerry Rubin, Mao, Black Panthers, Downtown Welfare Advocacy Center

**Interview Session (November 28, 1992): Digital File**

**Time      Keywords**

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*

00:00:16 *Question:* Where were you born? *Answer:* Baltimore, Maryland in 1942.

00:00:24 *Question:* What did your mother and father do? *Answer:* During wartime, her father's parents were Polish refugees and had a store. Her father was the first one to go to college and then went on to earn his Master's in Economics during the Great Depression. Her mother was of Jewish descent and wanted to go to Art School. She instead became a housewife after working at a department store for some time.

- 00:02:29 *Question:* You grew up in a very Jewish home? *Answer:* AH said she grew up in an assimilationist home. It was an ethnically Jewish neighborhood, but it was not religiously Jewish.
- 00:03:18 *Question:* Did you have brothers and sisters? *Answer:* One sister.
- 00:03:23 *Question:* What was your childhood like? *Answer:* Middle-class, comfortable, did not want for anything. AH's mother was an avid reader, so was AH. AH did not care much for television when it came out.
- 00:04:16 *Question:* When did you become politically aware? *Answer:* In high school, AH started reading the newspapers, especially the NY Times. AH also read many politically-oriented books that provoked her political awareness. Went to Goucher College because her parents wanted her to marry well, but AH thought it was a mistake. One summer, there were civil rights protests, at least one of which that she attended.
- 00:08:53 *Question:* It was action-oriented. *Answer:* Yes, it was all about action. AH first experienced seeing African Americans in leadership positions at these protests.
- 00:09:38 *Question:* Did you get arrested? *Answer:* No, AH couldn't recall anyone getting arrested at the sit-in. AH went to Columbia University Graduate School for Literature after graduating with Honors from Goucher.
- 00:09:58 *Question:* When did you graduate from Goucher? When did you enter graduate school? *Answer:* Graduated in 1962 from Goucher. AH dropped out of Columbia and went for a job in the Publishing industry. She ended up in the Rights & Permissions department because she was without connections. She saw the glass ceiling.
- 00:12:04 *Question:* Is that because you're a woman, too? *Answer:* Yes, it was really just because she was a woman. AH left the Rights & Permissions department job and went to graduate school to study Psychology.
- 00:12:20 *Question:* At Columbia? *Answer:* No, at Yeshiva University. AH did not have a background in psychology. Psychology came out of her idealism; she thought that she would be able to help people, like the mentally ill. When she went to visit a mental institution, she saw mostly Black, impoverished women. AH studied independently and then took the GRE (Graduate Record Examination).
- 00:13:18 *Question:* When was this? *Answer:* 1964. The summer that Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner were murdered, AH was still working in publishing. AH was very upset

- by that tragedy. AH went on to mention how she viewed graduate school as a way for women to get ahead, which is why she entered so many graduate programs. In 1964, while she was working at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows as a Pinkerton cop. She was working with mostly women, but the few White women that she did work with were very uneducated and very racist. There were sit-ins at the Florida Pavilion by SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). After a violent reaction by the police, AH gave one month's salary to SNCC as a way of protesting the police.
- 00:16:23 *Question:* Given your activism, why didn't you join? *Answer:* AH said that the protests were of another world. She would have had to quit her job, and that was a step that did not occur to her.
- 00:16:47 *Question:* I talked to Jane Adams; she is about your age. She went south. Did you consider that? *Answer:* AH said she wasn't that ballsy. She was a conventional liberal at that point and wasn't completely dedicated to the movement. At Yeshiva, AH was once again disillusioned by the idea of psychology helping people. AH grew to resent the pomposity of it. She dropped out again and continued to learn about the movement, current events, and activism. She decided to work for the New York Civil Liberties Union. She began working as an assistant for Ramona Ripston, head of Public Relations for the NY Civil Liberties Union. She eventually quit because of supposed sexism. While unemployed, AH met Abbie Hoffman at the Liberty House, a place where she was planning to volunteer.
- 00:21:51 *Question:* On your first day, you met him? *Answer:* Yes. AH was afraid of movement people; she felt intimidated because they knew more about politics than she did. She was afraid they would not accept her.
- 00:22:22 *Question:* What were your impressions of Abbie when you met him? *Answer:* She met him on a rainy day, when Abbie was working alone in the store. Abbie was wearing brown corduroy pants with a cowboy shirt on. She knew immediately that he was probably the man who founded the store. No one came into the store, so they conversed the whole day. They hit it off, especially since he was also an intellectual.
- 00:23:53 *Question:* Had you taken acid before? *Answer:* No, AH had never even seen acid before.
- 00:24:10 *Question:* Were you scared to take it? *Answer:* Yes, but Abbie wasn't really offering the acid to her. AH said he was just showing off. Beatles music was playing on the radio the whole day and they made a date for later that night. AH said she had never met anyone like Abbie Hoffman before.

- 00:25:28 *Question:* That's interesting because in his biography, Abbie was said to have a macho, tough-guy complex. *Answer:* AH said it was the way gay guys could be sexy. She never saw him as macho; she thought the macho thing was kind of like an act or a style.
- 00:27:03 *Question:* How did your relationship develop? *Answer:* Abbie showed up at her apartment that night with a brown paper lunch bag. They played a Beatles album and Abbie brought up the subject of Mao to show her that reality is not always what it seems.
- 00:28:13 *Question:* He challenged you? *Answer:* Yes. From that point, the relationship moved quickly. They moved in together two weeks later.
- 00:28:36 *Question:* You were immersed in the movement after that? *Answer:* Yes. AH understood what was happening in the movement after meeting Abbie.
- 00:30:03 *Question:* He brought out the best in you, right? *Answer:* Yes. AH said her favorite demonstration was the Pentagon demonstration. Abbie pushed her to do things she would never do alone.
- 00:31:46 *Question:* Did he encourage you as a person? *Answer:* Yes. Abbie viewed AH as the female version of him, which she found untrue, but flattering.
- 00:32:22 *Question:* Did he listen to your ideas? *Answer:* Yes, they had a wonderful dialogue. AH gave him appropriate, intelligent feedback.
- 00:32:56 *Question:* You had an influence on him? *Answer:* Yes. AH viewed herself as an ethically concerned person rather than a Leftie. AH didn't think Abbie was really a Leftie either, but was more ideological. He was about solving problems and issues as a grassroots organizer. AH wasn't part of the avant-garde. Neither of them were really part of the organized Left.
- 00:34:57 *Question:* When Black Power was coming in? *Answer:* Abbie mourned that the Whites were being pushed out of the movement when Black Power came about. Abbie was told to go organize the White community.
- 00:35:09 *Question:* How did the other activists perceive you? Did they take you seriously? *Answer:* AH thought that she was accepted, but she did not aspire to a leadership role. She accepted Abbie and the others as leaders. AH was not aware of women's liberation or sexism in the movement. AH began to discuss other activists and how they fell apart because of various issues. The surviving members were living in California.

- 00:38:38 *Question:* Where's Jim Furrat living? *Answer:* Santa Monica. AH continued listing other activists.
- 00:39:01 *Question:* What was your impression of Jerry Rubin? *Answer:* AH was still close to Rubin, but during the movement, the two were not close. Rubin's personality rubbed her the wrong way.
- 00:40:34 *Question:* Given his transformation into a modern day Yuppie, do you think he was a genuine Leftist? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:42:00 *Question:* I've interviewed him before, but I will again for this book. I was impressed with him, but I didn't really like him in the 1960s either. Rubin was more likeable later in life. *Answer:* AH agreed with being able to like him more. RC and AH said that he was gentler.
- 00:42:55 *Question:* What about the controversy surrounding the biography about Abbie? *Answer:* AH didn't want Rubin writing a real biography about Abbie. She thought that Rubin should write about the time in which they knew each other. However, she was upset with Abbie's brother for preventing Rubin from writing the book because of the freedom of speech.
- 00:44:00 *Question:* Why did the publishing company suddenly change over? *Answer:* Jack, Abbie's brother did that. AH and RC discussed the controversy with Jack and others who were not close to Abbie coming out of the woodwork after Abbie's death.
- 00:45:17 *Question:* According to the biography, Abbie got a lot of heat from women's groups. *Answer:* He did, but Abbie believed in women's liberation.
- 00:47:29 **[no question]** Abbie was a playful and theatrical guy. He enjoyed macho things and was fearless. AH saw Abbie's relationship with women as the battle of the sexes and that it was perfectly normal.
- 00:49:01 *Question:* Were you aware of the manic-depressive side? *Answer:* No. She knew he was manic, but she thought her lack of awareness was a failure on her part because she had a Psychology degree. She didn't see it as a problem until he went underground. She wouldn't have let him go underground alone if she had known about his manic-depressive disorder.
- 00:52:25 *Question:* He (well-known psychologist) was willing to diagnose and help Abbie if he came in? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:52:29 *Question:* How did having a child affect your relationship? *Answer:* AH backtracks to how she felt and her part in the movement.

- 00:53:42 *Question:* This was the Chicago Eight? *Answer:* Yes. AH continued her story. She was at the trial, supporting Abbie. After the trial, Abbie asked AH to go to Algeria to represent him, but she did not want to go. AH said she was going through changes.
- 00:54:54 *Question:* You were going through changes? *Answer:* Yes. The Women's Liberation movement had already started and AH respected the women, but she was torn about supporting them because she knew the leaders of the Women's Liberation movement would take any chance to attack Abbie. She couldn't go to a consciousness raising meeting because everyone would be waiting for a slip up. AH said she became very isolated after that. AH went to Algeria anyway. Tim Leary and his wife were there as well. The Black Panthers were influenced by the negative treatment of Algerian women. They put women back in their domestic roles. AH fled Algeria to Paris, where Abbie was. In Paris there was a big Yippie split. No one believed AH's version of what happened in Algeria except for Abbie and a few of their friends. AH was so disillusioned by that point that she was ready to have a child and drop out of the movement. They conceived their first child, America, in Paris.
- 01:00:40 *Question:* How did that relate to your relationship with Abbie and the movement? *Answer:* AH said it was very stressful time with the baby with Abbie away giving speeches to make money.
- 01:01:49 *Question:* That's interesting because you and Abbie were getting criticized for getting rich off the movement. *Answer:* The *Rolling Stone* said that the Hoffman's lived in a penthouse. In reality, they lived on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor. The couple lived modestly, giving \$25,000 to the Black Panther Defense Committee. AH said they were hedonists and enjoyed themselves, unlike the Left.
- 01:04:30 *Question:* Was Abbie getting disillusioned at the time? *Answer:* Yes. Women and men were attacking him.
- 01:07:31 *Question:* Do you feel like you accomplished anything, looking back? *Answer:* It's debatable; people debate whether or not the movement stopped the war. AH thought that the movement was very important and they were a great cultural influence.
- 01:10:12 *Question:* What's going to happen in the future? *Answer:* AH thought there was going to be a technological revolution.
- 01:11:23 *Question:* You think it's positive? *Answer:* Yes. AH was an optimist, despite the tragedies of the world. AH believed that we were becoming one world.
- 01:14:09 *Question:* Weren't the 1980s depressing with the Reagan Revolution and its shift towards the "I" rather than the "we"? *Answer:* Abbie was a born organizer, so he

- took it in stride. AH was raising a child and struggling for money.
- 01:16:00 *Question:* Let's backtrack and talk about Abbie and the cocaine allegations. Did he really sell cocaine? *Answer:* No. AH did think that cocaine set off his illness (the manic-depression).
- 01:17:15 *Question:* Did you regret not going underground with him? *Answer:* Yes. If she had realized he had been manic-depressive, she would have gone. She also realized that she wouldn't have been able to control him. Her presence may have made it worse because he could have been in danger of being caught with a wife and child. They probably would have fought. She did regret letting him go underground alone.
- 01:18:18 *Question:* Would your marriage have survived if you had gone underground with him? *Answer:* AH wasn't sure if it would have because of the pressures of being underground and his illness. She did love him very much, but she was unsure if he would have been able to control him. AH felt very guilty over Abbie's death and her ignorance about his illness.
- 01:19:42 *Question:* But your life was hell in terms of the FBI and trying to raise a child. *Answer:* Yes, but that time was the most important part of her life. The Women's Liberation movement had been eating away at her and she finally had to do the things she wanted to do and get credit for it. AH finally respected herself. In her time away from Abbie, AH raised awareness for women on welfare (Downtown Welfare Advocacy Center) and took many strides to help the Women's Liberation movement.
- 01:23:18 *Question:* How long did this go on for? *Answer:* For AH, it only lasted a year after she raised the money and organized everything. She got burned out and caught pneumonia. She left and started writing her book with Abbie (*To America with Love: Letters from the Underground*). AH left NY and went to New Mexico. She was going to live underground with Abbie and his new wife and establish a commune. That didn't work out well since no one could find good work and no one else had children and didn't help AH out with America. AH ended up leaving, moving to Santa Fe, and working as a reporter. AH bounced around jobs, even working in the movie business.
- 01:26:50 *Question:* What did you do in the movie business? *Answer:* AH worked as a story writer for Jon Voight, who she and Abbie met at the Chicago Conspiracy Trial.
- 01:27:00 *Question:* What did that involve? *Answer:* AH was a story editor. Jon didn't make any movies, but had a partner who dominated. AH said it was a good job; she and America lived in Venice. It was her first real job after giving birth to America. AH went on to talk about the rights of women, whether they want to stay at home or enter the working world and joining mainstream America.



- 01:28:45 *Question:* Do you have any ideas on how that will come about? *Answer:* AH believed that the electronic revolution will require the mass training of people; men and women, Black and White, to create the technology.
- 01:30:57 *Question:* You are a part of this revolution, right? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:32:38 *Question:* It's ironic. You have the generation gap of the 80s, right? *Answer:* Yes. AH said she was fortunate that her son had a strong personality and wasn't interested in cigarettes, despite growing up in a working class environment.
- 01:34:24 *Question:* Do you still consider yourself a feminist? *Answer:* Yes. AH was surprised how people still consider that controversial.
- 01:34:39 **[no question]** AH was speaking about the Thomas-Hill trial and Gates becoming the head of the CIA.
- 01:36:44 *Question:* Have you ever experienced sexual harassment? *Answer:* No, and AH spoke about the gender discrimination of various occupations, like construction vs. office working. AH also spoke about the differences between the levels of sexual harassment.
- 01:37:23 *Question:* Were you angry about the Hill hearings? *Answer:* Of course. AH also felt like Hill's side let Thomas' side takeover the media.
- 01:37:48 *Question:* Did you think it was consciousness rising on the part of women? *Answer:* Yes. The American public is easily swayed.
- 01:38:06 *Question:* I believed her. *Answer:* AH believed that most people, even Black people believed Anita Hill. The Black people were just angry that she came out publicly and embarrassed them as a people.
- 01:38:45 *Question:* Just as a man, sizing up another man-Clarence Thomas was lying. He was into pornography. *Answer:* RC and AH had a conversation on Thomas and the reasons he was disliked, then moved onto why the African American community was upset with Anita Hill.
- 01:39:27 **[no question]** AH discussed being a single mother and how much harder life would have been if she had been an African American single mother. AH said that women and children were the majority of the poor and that it was important to pay attention to them and help them. With the liberation of women comes the advancement of societies.

01:41:16 *Question:* Especially in the third world. *Answer:* Yes. Continued on with the women's issues that AH was concerned with. AH then spoke of ideologies and the situational ideologies/philosophies.

01:45:22 *Question:* You sound optimistic. What are your plans for your life? *Answer:* AH said she was finally doing work that she liked doing and actually cared about for the first time. She was producing multimedia and was fascinated by technology and the danger that comes with it.

01:50:07 *End of interview*