2-1-2014

For Love and for Justice: Narratives of Lesbian Activism

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For Love and For Justice: Narratives of Lesbian Activism

By

Kelly Anderson

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of The Graduate Center, City University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

For Love and for Justice: Narratives of Lesbian Activism

By

Kelly Anderson

Adviser: Professor Blanche Wiesen Cook

This dissertation explores the role of lesbians in the U.S. second wave feminist movement, arguing that the history of women’s liberation is more diverse, more intersectional, and more radical than previously documented. The body of this work is five oral histories conducted with lifelong activists and public intellectuals for the Voices of Feminism project at the Sophia Smith Collection: Katherine Acey, former Executive Director of the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice; Dorothy Allison, author and sex radical; Suzanne Pharr, southern anti-racist organizer and author; Achebe Powell, activist and diversity trainer; and Carmen Vázquez, LGBT activist and founding director of the San Francisco Women’s Building. Taken together, their stories dovetail into a new narrative about the relationship between lesbians, feminism, and queer liberation. In addition to the edited transcripts, this dissertation includes a new chronology of gender and sexual liberation, demonstrating the interconnectedness of late 20th century social change movements, and a chapter on oral history methodology. This work adds to our collective knowledge about lesbian lives by sharing five important life narratives, contributes to a re-imagination of the vast and intersectional scope of second wave feminism and sexual liberation, and attempts to disrupt conventional methods of documenting and sharing history by privileging oral narratives.
Acknowledgements

This project has been in my life for a very long time. So my gratitude is deep and wide. Thank you to my mentors—Bonnie Anderson, Bettina Aptheker, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Martin Duberman, Gerald Markowitz, Priscilla Murolo, and Elizabeth Wood—for years of encouragement and for giving me the tools to share these stories. I’m deeply grateful for the sustenance of my family and friends, particularly graduate school comrades Hilary Hallett and Marcia Gallo, who have been with me for the long haul. Working with the Voices of Feminism project at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College has been the opportunity of a lifetime. Thank you to colleagues Joyce Follet and Sherrill Redmon for that open door.

And, most importantly, I’m profoundly grateful to the women whose stories I share here: Katherine Acey, Dorothy Allison, Suzanne Pharr, Achebe Powell, and Carmen Vázquez. Thank you for your trust, your grit, and your vision of liberation. The world is a better place because of you.
“We wanted a feminist revolution. I wanted it like a lover. I wanted it like justice.”

- Dorothy Allison
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Introductions

This project lies at the intersections—of disciplines, of methods, and of literatures. Of activism and the academy. Of oral testimony and written. Of preserving the past and creating a usable history, or as historian Maylei Blackwell calls a “retrofitted memory.” I’ve done this work for them, my narrators, the women who came before me who showed me a way to be in this world and who I wish to honor by sharing their lives with you, with my students, your students. This project lives at the intersection of heart and mind. It’s about knowledge but also about relationships. My approach is lies at the intersection of the teachings from my best mentors. Bettina Aptheker taught me to “pivot the center;” Amy Swerdlow taught me to keep pushing the timeline back, to look earlier; Priscilla Murolo taught me to always look at the crossroads; Liz Wood illuminated the lesbian spaces; and Blanche Cook taught me how to document lesbian history with integrity and that all biographies are really group portraits.

My dissertation is a “portrait” of five women who have been life-long activists, change makers, and cultural workers. Self-identified feminists, radicals, lesbians, and visionaries. All baby-boomers. All friends and comrades in various capacities. Katherine Acey, an Arab-American who got her start in civil rights, is a tour-de-force in progressive, feminist philanthropy. Dorothy Allison is a truth-teller and story-teller who has been an organizer in the trenches and a writer who has forever changed the ways that we talk about class, sexuality, and violence. Achebe Betty Powell is a born leader, a powerful orator and teacher who has been organizing on an international stage far longer than we’ve been using the term “global feminism.” Suzanne Pharr is a proud Southerner, an organizer who has always been at the fore of social justice by insisting that, for example, the battered women’s movement be a movement about racism and homophobia as much as it is about gender. And Carmen Vázquez, a Nuyorican butch, has led the women’s movement and the LGBT movement away from reform and towards radical change, always asking us to look for justice rather than rights. My intention is that a group portrait of radical lesbian leaders and visionaries will challenge our existing chronologies and paradigms about U.S. second wave feminism, that the lives of Acey, Allison, Pharr, Powell and Vázquez remind us that “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Second wave feminism is and can be a multi-racial, intersectional, social justice movement with vibrant and courageous lesbian and queer leadership. Our history tells us so.

I’ve always been a good listener. I think it’s the yearning for wisdom, for someone to point me in the right direction. This lesbian and feminist had the good fortune to be born on
Stonewall in 1969 but landed in the American South, a region reluctant to give up “tradition” for Yankee ways. So despite the revolutions, the burning undergarments and cities, I was sequestered in a triumphalist Confederate storyline with no leading roles for strong women or queers of any kind. And when I started to unlearn and relearn a different story of the American past, particularly one with women and LGBT people as major players, it is not an overstatement to say that my world turned upside down. My passion for knowledge, for knowing about the resilience and beauty of my (queer and feminist) ancestors has only grown more insistent. Because now I get to pass it on. For the past 15 years, I have been an educator, teaching mostly women’s and LGBT histories to (mostly) women and queer people. It changes them. It changes our communities and our movements. It’s a kind of truth-telling and a prayer that operates on both a deeply spiritual and rigorous intellectual plane for me, all at the same time.

In 2004, I was fortunate enough to land in a position at Smith College that would allow me to be a historian and activist and teacher all at the same. This dissertation is a result of the work I’ve done as an oral historian at the Sophia Smith Collection. I began the position an amateur, but with a great passion for and a fair amount of experience in doing the work. My past ten years as an oral historian have fundamentally altered the way I do history. This dissertation is very different because of it. In effect, this work is really an amalgam of both fields—of traditional history and of oral history. I don’t just use oral history as a method; rather this is a dissertation about oral history. About what it means to craft new narratives using oral testimony. It’s about inhabiting the subjective and exploring what that means about the past rather than bending one person’s truth to fit the mold of objectivity. This is not what I was taught, but it is the historian I’ve become.

The (Queer) Journey and the Art of Listening

The documentation of LGBT histories has largely been a grassroots, community based effort that has been part of queer resistance as much as it has been about “History.” Queer histories have used oral testimony extensively because we have lacked other kinds of evidence, especially in our own voices. So the oral history becomes our most valuable and widely used archive of LGBT experience. Despite historians’ extensive reliance on oral testimony, the practice of oral history has been vastly under-theorized until recently.
Historian Nan Alamilla Boyd, is one of the first to try to map what it means to do “queer oral history.” In her essay “Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History,” Boyd asks how researchers have grappled with queer theory and what impact that work has had on LGBT history. In other words, Boyd takes on the method of oral history, as it is used by LGBT historians, and asks important questions about the ways oral history can, or cannot, get at questions of sex, sexuality, and desire. She argues that queer theory’s most important challenge to history is the conflation of same-sex behavior or desire with sexual identity. How do we disentangle queer identity and notions of the queer self from behavior? Boyd takes us through the key works in the field of LGBT history—John D’Emilio’s work on the homophile movement, George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, Kennedy and Davis’s book on working class lesbians in Buffalo mid-century, Esther Newton’s work on Cherry Grove, and finally John Howard’s book on Southern African American men—in order to look at how oral history was employed. As the field has grown up alongside queer theory, the method has become more reflexive and more creative.

She is particularly drawn to Howard’s use of the “twice told story,” a narrative that is second-hand or hearsay, as a form of evidence. To most academics, this would not be considered a reliable form of evidence. If oral history testimony is already suspect, something second-hand would be relegated to gossip at best. But for Howard, this unorthodox method this allows him document “men like that,” to trace same-sex desire and relations between men who would not talk about it, write about it, or even claim a gay identity. This allows silent voices to emerge who would not otherwise fall within the confines of modern sexual identities. And still, despite our best intentions to move away from familiar scripts of LGBT experience, identity, and coming out, our narrators often perceive the gay and lesbian history project as a linear and sanitized journey through self-knowledge and self-acceptance, visibility, community building and political agency, and making family. Thus, the enterprise of queer oral history is an integral piece of documenting our past but not one without its challenges and limitations. Boyd’s insightful piece, and her recent anthology co-edited with Horacio Roque Ramirez, maps the “state of the field” and what some of our new directions might be.

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I want to turn from theory and method and towards practice. Queer oral history is employed by historians, of course, but also grassroots activists, people wanting to document their own communities and lives, young people in search of elders. On the ground, this is what queer oral history looks like. The Sophia Smith Collection’s Voices of Feminism project conducted oral histories with over 60 narrators, many of whom were lesbian, in order to diversify archival material available to scholars and to activists about women and social change work. The intention behind this project was expressly political—a more complex understanding of women’s activism, with lesbians, poor women, and women of color at the center—would not only transform our storytelling but could also have an impact on current feminist struggles. I created another collection at Smith, Documenting Lesbian Lives, which is a student-based project. Students in this seminar have collected over 60 oral histories with queer women, also available on the SSC website and in the archives.

E. Patrick Johnson, a historian out of Northwestern, conducted oral histories with African American gay men in the South and his resulting theater project, Sweet Tea, is similarly restorative and committed to the promise of visibility. Johnson’s work addresses an important historical gap and what is exciting about his work is that he has pivoted the center of LGBT history—from urban to rural, and from the fixed and dominant notion of gay identity to one that is multi-faceted and contradictory. But even more than that, from the perspective of oral history, it is his return to orality, and the use of performance that brings Sweet Tea out of the academy and into public dialogue.

The Old Lesbian Oral History Project, organized by Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, offers us another model and one that I think is typical of community-based history projects—it’s grassroots and network-based, and conducted with a sense of urgency as the focus of their work is women 70 and older. The Old Lesbian History Project has also returned their research to the community—in the form of a website and a published collection. And lastly, the Mobile Homecoming Project, is a travelling, inter-generational oral history project about lesbians/queer women of African descent. This work, to me, is so exciting because it’s about chronicling queer histories but with a spiritual purpose—Mobile Homecoming is deeply rooted in forming connections, in personal and community transformation, and dare I say, love. It is one of the most exciting ways that I have seen oral history used as a liberation tool.

I want to share a little bit about my journey with oral history. There are two things I love most about oral history. And I think they make our profession profoundly uncomfortable
still. I like its widespread use by community and grassroots groups who claim and tell their own histories rather than relying on professional historians to do that work. Done well, this is democratic history at its finest. It shifts our own sense of self to take charge of our past. Young queer people sitting down with their elders can be transformative and even healing, and frankly it is something we need to do more of if the queer movement is going to thrive in the future. The other facet of oral history that I love, as a researcher, is the personal connection, the creation of a relationship. I enjoy the “shared authority”, involved in creating historical evidence. I have been doing oral history for over 25 years, as a student, as part of my activism, as a researcher and historian, and now as a teacher. I really do not know history without it.

Here are a few of my “aha” moments along the way—because they will tell you something about me and my work and because these pivotal moments have become lessons for me in how to be a better interviewer. In the 1980s, as a college student at UC Santa Cruz, I worked for a feminist organization that provided services to rape survivors and battered women. I decided to write my senior thesis on the organization and I conducted oral histories as part of my research. In those interviews I found a “story” that I would not have in documents—I wanted to understand the transition from radical social movements to social service industry, as manifested in battered women’s shelters. The oral histories I conducted alerted me to the key function of racism in that transition. But I also learned something else—that the shelter workers, and indeed the anti-violence movement as a whole, was predominantly lesbian. That was the story underneath the story—but it was not what I was looking for and I did not write about it. The women I interviewed did not ask for that exposure. And because I was also closeted at the time, I did not want to risk the personal investment either. (And this personal experience of trying to document the shelter movement, or anti-violence movement, mirrors the history that has been written. We STILL do not talk about that work, or the women’s health movement, as lesbian histories.)

In the 1990s, I was involved with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, an archive started by Joan Nestle and Deb Edel in New York. I was working on a project documenting the Daughters of Bilitis through oral history, and I was working with the gay and lesbian seniors organization, SAGE (then Senior Action in a Gay Environment, now Seniors and Advocacy for GLBT Elders). The DOB project added more than 70 oral histories and a half-finished documentary film to the LHA; the SAGE project marked and celebrated their 20th anniversary.
and produced a photography and oral history exhibit. This work cemented for me that oral history is a community builder, a tool for intergenerational dialogue, and that it has both radical and conservative potentials in the LGBT community. I became acutely aware of what gets told about our past and what gets left out, especially when it is for public consumption, because we are a community so divided over questions of race, class, gender, and sex. At SAGE, the “history committee” debated endlessly who to include or not. Yes to the very few people of color involved at the time, no to the flamboyant and rough. For both SAGE and to a lesser extent DOB, we, the committee, wanted something that honored who we are and our contributions, a compelling portrait of what it was like in the “old” days. And we wanted something that cleaned us up, made us look respectable, felt triumphant, could secure more grant funding, and downplayed sex. And again, these were more conservative times—because of AIDS, the early nineties brought a new militancy to queer politics represented by Act Up and the Lesbian Avengers, but there was also a turn towards respectability and sanitization and lip service, rather than real change, around racial diversity.

My work with the Voices of Feminism project taught me how complicated it all is. How telling one’s story is far from simple. That they change all the time. That there is no such thing as “the truth.” That for someone to offer you their time and their memories is a gift and a risk. And that we, the interviewers, hold much responsibility in our hands for their well-being on this journey. What I set out to discover and document through VOF was the role lesbians have played in the movements for social justice. I knew it was extensive, I knew that lesbians had filled the ranks of the feminist, health, environmental, and anti-violence movements but that it wasn’t reflected in the histories being written.

What I found was that. And more. I heard stories of profound joy. I heard stories of healing and wholeness, about the ways in which the movement, or lovers, or God or the Goddess eased some of the hurt of misogyny and racism and homophobia. And I heard more stories about trauma than I ever thought imaginable. I found incest and abuse, multiple suicide attempts. I found lesbian violence. So many painful truths about our lives that were playing out in how we build families, what issues and causes lesbians become involved with and why, community and organizational fracture that had sex and relationships at the center. And I found out about myself that I had a hard time hearing them. I did an extensive interview years ago with activist Amber Hollibaugh. She repeatedly disclosed to me that she attempted suicide more than once. I never could acknowledge in our interview that truth for her. I was too
invested in her strength and a happy ending, the liberatory trajectory of a movement that made all of our lives better.

Queer lives often, though not all the time, contain pain, shame, hurt, anger, terror -- so we need to know how to talk about it. And when you “queer” the interview, it means you ask about, and have to be prepared to respond to, those hurt places. And also let them be, respecting silence and privacy. When you “queer” an interview, it also means that you have to ask about, and be prepared to respond to, conversation about sex and desire. That means breaking down barriers to talking about sex. It’s a challenge because culturally we are still so prudish, as queer people we have tended towards a sanitized public version of ourselves that is asexual and therefore less threatening, and as individuals, we have our own pleasures and dangers around sex that can get in the way of effective and non-judgmental communication with another whose erotic terrain might look very different from our own.

Part of the “queering” too is an examination of what we mean by public and private. What is “private” information and what do we, the public, have access to? When I prepare my students to conduct oral histories, for example, they sometimes seem reluctant to ask about sex or relationships. They wonder what is too “personal?” What do we ask our narrators to “expose” and how do we share in the responsibility in that process? The practice of feminist history has meant a breaking of silence about women and sexuality—from abortions and contraception, to rape, incest, battery, marriage and sexual desire. Queer history has to do the same and more, while at the same time respecting the autonomy of our narrators, the authority they have over their own lives, and the role, the power we share with them in crafting our histories.

Yes, oral histories deliver new empirical data which can challenge existing historical narratives. More than that, the exploration of the subjective and the collaboratively crafted meaning of lived experience is what excites me. It is oral history’s transformative potential, for communities and individuals, that keeps me hooked. As an oral historian, I have found the histories of my tribe that I /we queer people need to know for our survival. I found out how to be a better listener. And, most importantly for myself and for my work as a historian, I found out how to hold complexity, be open to surprise, and to how to let go of simplistic narratives that no longer serve us in our quest for a usable past. It is in this spirit that I have undertaken the project of documenting (five) queer women and activism.
**Historical Context (What we already know)**

Historians like Ruth Rosen and Estelle Freedman have called the modern women’s movement the longest revolution in American history. Before the 1960s, American women were denied fundamental civil rights, access to political power, economic freedoms, control over their bodies including reproduction and sexuality, and lived in a misogynistic culture that curtailed their behaviors, attitudes, emotional well-being, and imagination for the future. Bars would not serve women; credit cards were denied to women; juries were all male; higher education limited women’s enrollment; no women ran big corporations or universities or our governments. All hurricanes were named after women reflecting the widespread belief that women wreaked havoc. Women could not get birth control if unmarried, an abortion either way, and had no recourse against sexual and interpersonal violence. Catching up to women’s changing roles in American society, the women’s movement addressed legislative reform, wages and economic justice, welfare, reproductive rights, women’s health, violence, electoral representation, child-rearing, and sexual pleasure.

The women’s liberation movement was not the only revolution of the late 20th century. The racial justice movement of the 1950s and 60s was a women’s movement in and of itself, with a growing gender consciousness and strong women leaders. From Ella Baker, Jo Ann Robinson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash and Rosa Parks, the women of the civil rights era, like the women of the abolitionist and early suffrage movements, mobilized a mass movement and played key roles despite the greater visibility of male leadership. Black women, anti-racist white Christian allies, and Jewish women from the North bravely demonstrated at lunch counters, bus stops, and were incarcerated for challenging segregation.

Memoirs of seasoned activists and historical monographs trace the direct impact the racial justice movement had on the revival of feminism, both liberal and radical. When the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established as a result of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, feminists decided to create a formal lobbying organization akin to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1966 the National Organization for Women was founded by women like African American civil rights lawyer Pauli Murray and white feminist, and influential author, Betty Friedan. NOW pledged to support the full participation of women in American society and took on issues like antidiscrimination law and supported women candidates for public office. While this branch of feminism was
predominantly white, liberal feminism could claim key women of color leaders among its ranks—like Aileen Hernandez, an early president of NOW, Shirley Chisholm, the African American presidential candidate, and Eleanor Holmes Norton, one of the founders of the National Black Feminist Organization.

The more radical wing of the women’s liberation movement was inspired by both the racial justice movement and the student movements of the 1960s. Working alongside black women leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer and Septima Clark was a radicalizing experience for young white women who began to apply their new consciousness to the oppression of women in addition to race. Some white women broke away from the male-dominated left to form feminist organizations like the Redstockings, Radical Women, and the Furies. Some women of color broke off from nationalist politics to form their own organizations like the Black Women’s Liberation Group of Mount Vernon/New Rochelle or Las Hijas de Cuauhtemoc, both early formal manifestation of black and Chicana feminisms.

According to scholar Becky Thompson, early feminist of color groups like the National Black Feminist Organization and its offshoot, the Combahee River Collective, provided the foundation for the most far-reaching organizing by women of color in U.S. history. Feminists of color during the 1970s opened up space for Asian, Latina, African American, and Native American women to meet and organize independently. And out of autonomous identity–based organizations grew coalition work, across racial groups and including white allies. Moreover, the articulation of a new politic by women like Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde is perhaps multi-racial feminism’s most significant legacy. From Smith came a definition of feminism so expansive it remains a model today. She wrote, “Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working class women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.”

In addition to a revolution around race and gender, the homophile/gay liberation movement, begun in the early 1950s by the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, exploded as a full-blown, militant sexual liberation movement by the early 1970s. Like the civil rights and women’s movements, the lesbian and gay movement was a diverse assemblage of reform organizations like the DOB, more radical groups like the Gay Academic Union and

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Gay Liberation Front, and growing organizations with a national agenda like the Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Increasingly frustrated with the sexism of their gay brothers and thrilled with the possibilities of women’s liberation, many lesbians were attracted to the ideas of separatism. Martha Shelley, the outspoken activist and former president of the New York chapter of DOB, embodies these historical shifts and confluence of movements. An anti-war activist during the late 1960s while a student at City College, Shelley honed her leadership skills as a student organizer. After college, she took on a leadership role with DOB and with the Barnard students’ Homophile League. After Stonewall, she was a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front and then and organizer of the Lavender Menace action in 1970 at the Second Congress to Unite Women. Shelley was like many of her comrades at the time—an activist committed to the great array of liberation movements of the time.

For the women whose lives were at the intersections of feminisms, gay liberation, and racial justice, there can be no neat division between movements or identities. The cultural work, in addition to the activism, of lesbians of color during the 1980s demanded intersectionality from feminism. Audre Lorde—the daughter of Caribbean immigrants, mother, warrior, cancer survivor, lesbian—has been the preeminent voice for the recognition of difference and the interconnectedness of all oppressions. Lorde’s multiple publications of essays and poetry, most notably her memoir Zami: A New Spelling of Name (1983) and Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (1984), offered new frameworks for a feminism that was located within the seat of difference, that would be accountable to all women regardless of race, class, and sexuality. A poet and artist, a fervent activist, and a public intellectual, Lorde’s truth-telling and feminist vision became fertile ground for a revolution in public dialogue and in cultural production. The work of Lorde, along with others like Toni Cade, Barbara Smith, Maxine Hong Kingston, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, set out a new blueprint for multiracial and social justice feminism, one that would articulate the complexity and multidimensionality of the lives of women of color and a roadmap of what is required for white women to be meaningful allies.

For too long, the historical literature has compartmentalized movement histories around identity politics. For the women of this study, a multi-issue, or intersectional, framework was employed long before Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term or the (very recent) women’s movement adopted the social justice framework. For Suzanne Pharr, this meant that the Women’s Project was an anti-racist organization as much as it was about gender and
violence. For Achebe Powell, when she and Charlotte Bunch conducted trainings at the international meetings (either UN based or the Latin American Encuentros) they had to start from a place of intersectionality. The politics of location, including geography and also categories of identity, were central to their organizing in a global context. For Dorothy Allison and her peers at Conditions magazine, race, class, and sexuality were at the heart of the work and diversity was better represented there than in any other periodical from the 1970s. Founded in 1976, the Conditions collective published lesbians of color like Cheryl Clark, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Smith. The publication was international in scope, intersectional in analysis and offerings, a collective with sexuality and race at the core.

The print legacies of feminism leave us evidence of multi-racial, social justice oriented feminism. Those conversations were also happening on the leadership level of the LGBT (then gay and lesbian) liberation movements about a decade later. In the early 1990s, leadership of the gay and lesbian movements met to strategize. Fearing the centrist turn in the movement towards gay marriage and fighting “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” military policies, radical activists like Carmen Vázquez, Amber Hollibaugh, Urvashi Vaid, John D’Emilio and others remained rooted in liberation rather than reform. The mission statement for “Queer Left Dialogues” states that their goals are “rooted in the principles of individual autonomy in sexuality and reproduction, social and economic justice for all peoples of the world, the necessity of global peace and disarmament, and the preservation of a life-sustaining global ecology.” By claiming themselves to be “leftist,” they meant an understanding that the struggle for lesbian and gay liberation was “integrally tied to the struggles against class oppression, racism, and sexism.” At the time of the group’s founding, 70 percent were women, and 70 percent were people of color, many of whom were playing key leadership roles in movements for women’s liberation, environmental justice, health and HIV/AIDS, and anti-racism work.

At the intersections of LGBT politics and feminism were gatherings like the Lesbians of Color Conference, sponsored by the Women’s Building in San Francisco in 1986. The theme was the “Multi-diversity of oppression: sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, and homophobia.” Workshops including the history of lesbians of color, the particularities of oppressions, and steps to unity. Plenary sessions included Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Michelle Cliff, Pat Norman, Barbara Cameron, and Carmen Vázquez.

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4 Carmen Vázquez Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Box 2.
5 Women’s Building Papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.
and Lesbian Task Force’s Creating Change Conference, just a few years later, a workshop on “Lesbian Health Care Organizing” included Vázquez, Ming-Yeung Lu from the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance, Dr. Marjorie Hill, and Sabrina Sojourner from the Task Force and NOW.6 These two examples represent a myriad of conversations and actions designed to move forward social justice work on behalf of all women, and all LGBT peoples, with a keen attention paid to race and class.

Review of the Recent Literature (Where are we?)

My interest in the role of lesbians in the women’s movement, in part, grew out of my frustration with the existing literature on the history of feminism. Sara Evans, Ruth Rosen, Alice Echols and others gave us the first attempt at the movement’s architecture, illuminating the roots of feminism in New Left and Civil Rights movements and distinguishing the lineage of liberal, socialist, radical, and cultural feminisms. Thanks to their efforts, we now had a framework with which to investigate the complexities of the second wave.

In the last ten years, the literature on the second wave of feminism, roughly mid-1960s to mid-1980s, has undergone a drastic revision. Thanks to scholars like Kimberly Springer, Benita Roth, Anne Valk, Anne Enke, Nancy Hewitt and Maylei Blackwell, fresh perspectives have emerged that challenge the very concept of feminist “waves” and shed light, specifically, on the roles women of color and lesbians have played in the movement. New chronologies have emerged that center race, class, sexuality, and gender expression within the context of feminism, which have altered our very definition of the term. In this section, I’ll lay out the recent interventions to the mainstream narrative of second wave feminism, both in terms of the chronology as well as new paradigms and methods.

One of the first full length studies to challenge a monolithic view of the second wave was Kimberly Springer’s *Living for the Revolution.* (2005) Springer’s study of black feminist organizations looks at the intersections between the civil rights movement and feminism, what she calls “politics in the cracks.” Springer contends that the dominant historiography of feminism gives some black feminist organizations, like the Third World Women’s Alliance or the National Black Feminist Organization, mention but only as reactions to racism within the (white) women’s movement. Springer suggests we look at the activism by women of color as

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6 Carmen Vazquez Papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.
parallel to the mainstream movement, rather than as a series of reactive moments, and that we
examine movement organizations as well as the evolving identities of the movement’s
participants, and how they influence one another, in order to get at the “interstitial politics” of
feminism for women of color.

In 2002, Becky Thompson articulated a new chronology of second wave feminism
with women of color at the center. Thompson builds on the work of Chela Sandoval, who
called the old version of second wave history the story of “hegemonic feminism.” This story
of a white, middle-class women’s movement with gender as the central mode of oppression,
often told by movement participants and historians alike, obscured the vital participation by
women of color and anti-racist white women. If we pivot the center to include a more diverse
range of activism, Thompson argues, we find a feminism characterized not by liberal, socialist,
and radical strains, but by an international perspective, attention to interlocking oppressions,
and support for coalition work.  

One of Thompson’s crucial interventions was the creation of parallel “multiracial
feminism” and “hegemonic feminism” chronologies. This map of key events and
organizations is a striking visual. Though Thompson locates the “height” of multiracial
feminism in the late 70s (and some disagree with her), there is no mistaking the flurry of
autonomous and feminist activity by women of color during that time period. In 1968, Shirley
Chisholm is elected to Congress; in 1971 the Hijas de Cuauhtemoc is founded; in 1972 Angela
Davis is acquitted, the Asian American Women’s Center and the National Conference of
Puerto Rican Women are founded. According to Thompson’s chronology, the origins of
multiracial feminism are located in the 60s and 70s, but flourish from the late 70s to late 80s.
Witness the explosion of literary and activist publications and presses like Conditions and
Kitchen Table Press, international gatherings like the Encuentros in Latin America, the
establishment of organizations like the National Black Women’s Health Project, and the
phenomenal participation by women of color in the United Nations World Conference in
Beijing in 1995.

In 2004, Benita Roth detailed the distinct racial and ethnic paths to feminism. Roth
uses the term “whitewashed” to describe the scholarship on the feminist movement because of
its propensity to erase the contributions of women of color. Rather than a white, middle-class
movement, Roth suggests the second wave be understood as a “group of feminisms,

7 Thompson.
movements made by activist women that were largely organizationally distinct from one
another, and from the beginning, organized around racial/ethnic lines.”8 Chronicling the
history of organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization, the Third World
Women’s Alliance, and the Combahee River Collective, Roth seeks out the unique articulation
of feminisms within diverse communities. She shows the “connections and cleavages”
between feminist movements. Rather than seeking out women of color in predominantly
white women’s organizations, Roth encourages scholars to see the ways in which women of
color have been organizing on their own, with feminist analysis as one component of a social
justice analysis. In addition to recasting the chronology, Roth argues that the very definition of
feminism is different for women of color. From Frances Beal to the Combahee River
Collective, even as early as the 1970s, women of color have defined feminism as a set of
interlocking oppressions, what we now call an “intersectional” approach. Women of color
embraced a feminism that detailed the mutually enforcing oppressions of race, gender, and
class.

Maylei Blackwell’s recent book, ¡Chicana Power! similarly calls for broadening the
scope of feminist history. To find the women of color, she asserts, means that we have to look
for feminism in multiple locations—from anti-poverty work to racially specific movements.
Documenting multiple feminisms, for Blackwell, is the antidote to a falsely constructed
“waves” model. Blackwell’s study is thorough, exciting, and a creative telling of the history
of Chicana feminism, beginning with the Hijas de Cuauhtemoc in 1968. In addition to new
historical information, I appreciate Blackwell’s theoretical interventions around history and
memory. I will try to make use of some of them in this work. For example, she refers to a
feminist genealogy of resistance as “retrofitted memory,” a past that has been re-worked and
re-remembered in order to serve the next generation of activists. Blackwell refers to activism
by women of color as “multiple feminist insurgencies,” reflecting the urgent, militant, and
intersectional tactics of that time. And lastly, I appreciate her brief, but significant, discussion
of her oral history methodology, referring to the “repertoire of oral history,” signifying that
oral history is an “enactment of embodied memory, a presence that exceeds the archives ability
to capture.”9

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8 Benita Roth. Separate Roads to Feminism (Boston: Cambridge Press, 2004), p.3.

Anne Enke and Anne Valk are the first historians of feminism to devote significant attention to lesbians. Building on the new frameworks offered by Roth, Springer, Sandoval, and others, Valk and Enke ask key questions about sexuality and the role of lesbians in the women’s movement. Valk’s study of Washington DC includes a brilliant chapter on the Furies, the lesbian feminist collective and publication that gave the movement key leaders like Charlotte Bunch, Rita Mae Brown, and Joan Biren. Anne Enke’s book about the upper Midwest asks, “How did women, literally, find the women’s movement?” She documents coffeehouses and bars, softball diamonds and parks, clinics and shelters, to illustrate the places and spaces of feminism. Enke writes, “A focus on contested space, as opposed to a focus on feminist identity, helps explain how feminism replicated exclusions even as feminists developed powerful critiques of social hierarchies. Simultaneously, it suggests a genealogy of the movement that helps account for its breadth and reveals its diversity.”

In other words Enke seeks out feminism “outside” and “alongside” the movement, a newly created space for women that doesn’t necessarily bear the name “feminist.” Enke’s is the first study that emphatically moves beyond the language of feminism in order to document the breadth and diversity of women’s activism.

Enke’s work also changes the landscape with regard to the role of lesbian in feminism. Lesbians figure prominently in this book, the first of its kind, because Enke moves past the tired questions of lesbian-baiting and divisiveness. She writes, the “spatial argument of this book has implications for understanding a key controversy within the historiography of feminism, namely, the place of lesbians in the movement. Although historians agree that lesbians, bisexual and passing women have been important to feminism, movement histories— with some important exceptions— obscure their influence; in most, lesbians appear as such only if and when they politicized their sexual identity.” Lesbians took leadership roles in creating feminist spaces—like clinics, shelters, and coffeehouses. Therefore shifting to a focus on public space, rather than self-identified feminist organizations, for example, makes the prominence of lesbians in the movement harder to ignore.

While many memoirs of the women’s movement are a delight to read and share narratives of enormous courage and sass, the genre, as a whole, has not pushed our historical knowledge in new directions. There are, of course, exceptions and one of those is Jeanne

11 Ibid. p.8.
Cordova’s recent memoir, *When We Were Outlaws: a Memoir of Love and Revolution*. Cordova breaks the mold in many ways. A Latina butch with a movement history as varied as her fascinating love life, Cordova’s activism covers 50+ years of LGBT politics, feminism, and coalition building. Her leadership began as president of the Daughters of Bilitis, Los Angeles chapter. Inspired by lesbian feminism, she opened the first gay and lesbian center in LA in 1971 and soon after started the magazine *Tides*. She was an organizer of conferences, a delegate to Houston in 1977, an activist tied to the Latina community, gay and lesbian politics, and women’s culture. Her memoir of love and politics (which are not over for Cordova in the least) challenge prevailing myths about feminism and activism, particularly around intersectionality and coalition-building and the not-so-tame sexualities of lesbian feminism’s most heralded leaders.

New Themes Emerge

In Urvashi Vaid’s new collection of essays, *Irresistible Revolution*, she resurrects the legacy of lesbian feminism in the essay “Ending Patriarchy.” She gave the talk, originally, at a conference on the legacy of lesbian feminism at the CUNY Graduate Center in 2010, “In Amerika they Call us Dykes,” which was sponsored by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies. Vaid notes the limits of 1970s lesbian feminism—most profoundly the narrow focus of separatism and the de-centering of social justice politics—but more importantly, she reassesses lesbian feminism’s unrecognized contributions to both mainstream LGBT politics and to feminism. Some of those gifts, Vaid argues, include, “the feminist articulation of the politics of difference, inclusion and intersection, a commitment to accessibility despite any disability, the idea of consensus decision-making as a norm, and the value placed on healing and spiritual renewal.”12 Vaid goes on to articulate four significant political contributions made by lesbians/dykes/queer women of the 1970s to the world of social justice activism generally. They are: inclusivity and accessibility, the importance of “process” over outcome, the importance of culture to politics, and a critique of heterosexism and heteronormativity. Vaid also acknowledges the way that lesbian feminism fell short on its own accord and how the virulent backlash against women and LGBT people in the Reagan era crushed the vitality

of many progressive movements. She offers a fair assessment of a moment and a generation, her generation, and in many ways, my project echoes Vaid’s assessment. In some respects, my dissertation is about the intersections of liberation movements, as embodied in five indefatigable visionaries. In others, it’s a reimagining of lesbian feminism, a resurrection of its values and personalities, told through a new set of voices.

The identity category “lesbian feminist” conjures a particular image of white, working to middle class, androgynous, separatist, flannel loving dykes. It is a stereotype that allows lesbian feminism to be dismissed as insignificant, if not absurd. But there was also some truth to the image; and the rigid strictures for behavior, as well as the perceived class, race, and gender bias inherent to the politic, was a source of exclusion and pain to many lesbian-identified women during the 1970s. My narrators all wrestled with Lesbian Feminism writ large. But they would all identify themselves as both lesbians/dykes/queer (depending on the era) and as feminists (no matter the era.) In other words, my intention is not to redefine the significance of lesbian feminism, per se, but it is a conversation happening around the edges of this project. Language is tricky business when it comes to queer lives. I will try to be as honest and accurate as possible and at the same time, language will fail me. “Lesbian feminism” is one of those instances—because of what it conjures, because it is slippery, because sometimes the two terms should be disentangled. Perhaps my configuration of “(lesbian) feminist” contributes to a productive deconstruction.

That said, let me lay out the emerging themes of these oral histories and what I think they offer to the historical narrative of lesbians and feminism. First, lesbian feminism, or even lesbians engaged with feminism, were not all white and middle class. In this cohort, Carmen Vázquez is Puerto Rican; Katherine Acey is Arab American; and Achebe Powell is African American. While they each entered the women’s movement through different avenues, each has been fiercely committed to women’s liberation, as lesbians, for decades. Organizationally, the courageous and multi-faceted social change work undertaken by the Combahee River Collective, the Kitchen Table Press, Conditions, The Third World Women’s Alliance, and the Women’s Building in San Francisco, just to name a few, were all efforts led by lesbians of color.

A second key theme is exclusion. For all of the significant ways that feminism led the way in understanding multiple oppressions, valued self-determination, opened doors to sexual pleasure and control over one’s body, and advanced an anti-racist, anti-classist rhetoric,
feminism can and has been a place of painful exclusion, even for women fiercely committed to the cause. In Dorothy Allison’s oral history, she talks about the vilification of her femme desires and presentation at the hands of feminists during the sex wars of the 1980s. Carmen Vázquez describes a similar rejection of her butch identity and masculine presentation by the lesbian community in San Francisco. Katherine Acey shares the exclusions she felt among other women of color, where she was often the lightest skinned woman in the room and alone in carving out space for Arab women in the emerging rubric of Third World women. For all five, experiences of exclusion are pivotal moments in the development of an intersectional analysis, pushing them further towards a politic that includes all of who they are, a relentless insistence that feminism address sexuality and race, and that the gay and lesbian movement be responsive to women.

A third theme that emerges among my narrators is the overlap of social movements and communities. Our historical narratives are constructed around false divisions of New Left, civil rights, women’s liberation, and LGBT movements. When Suzanne Pharr was involved with the National Coalition against Domestic Violence, she initiated a program on violence within the lesbian community. When Carmen Vázquez was Director of Public Policy at the LGBT Community Center in New York City, she created a national initiative, Causes in Common, to address the links between reproductive health for women and LGBT rights with the value of bodily sovereignty at its core. Achebe Powell insisted on lesbian inclusion in the National Black Feminist Organization. And the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which has been a home to many progressive lesbians, including Katherine Acey, Suzanne Pharr, Achebe Powell, and Carmen Vázquez, has been more accountable to women and people of color than any other mainstream gay organization because they have been in leadership roles since its founding.

Another false division that I hope my work addresses is that between politics and culture. In Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor’s essay, “Women’s Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism,” they explain that women’s culture (read lesbian culture) is often derided for its betrayal to “real” feminist politics. Therefore feminism’s decline, so it goes, is in part due to the surge of women’s coffeehouses, presses, and music that takes the place of organizing. They suggest, instead, the “culture of lesbian feminist communities both serves as a base of mobilization for women involved in a wide range of protest activities… and provides continuity from earlier stages of the women’s movement to the future flowering of feminism.”
In other words, rather than depoliticizing feminism, lesbian cultures “preserve the impulse.”¹³ I would like to take Rupp and Taylor’s assertion one step further. Cultural work IS political work. Yes, it keeps ideas alive during periods of abeyance. But I think it does more; literature and music and poetry change our world, alter the air we breathe. Dorothy Allison’s powerful truth-telling about sexual violence in her work, for example, has altered the landscape of our culture. Joan Biren’s photos, the first to be published with “lesbian” in the title of the book, had a tremendous impact on the ways that lesbians saw themselves, which in turn impacts the way that they interact with others and articulate a vision for their own lives and for their communities. While Allison and Vázquez are the only published poets and fiction-writers in this assembly, all five are creative beings and artists in various ways. Cultural work cannot be separated from what we think of as movement building.

Lastly, I hope these stories provide a powerful antidote to the myth that feminism was only a home for prudes. Feminism’s prim approach to sexual practices like S/M, pornography, or butch-femme has been ugly at times, witness Barnard in 1982, and was particularly charged during the 1980s as the debate over pornography ordinances heated up. Carol Vance, Lisa Duggan, and others have told those stories with passion and with an intellectual rigor that is some of feminist scholarship’s best contributions to women’s history. And still, I want us to also remember and recognize the fearless insistence by Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin, Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison and others that all sexualities and sex practices, even those perceived to be too flamboyant or dangerous, are rights to be safeguarded by feminists because sexual autonomy is one of feminism’s foundational principles. In theater, in poetry, in organizations like Samois, the Lesbian Sex Mafia, and the Lesbian AIDS Project, feminists have also been making room for sex and desire, no matter the form.

What Follows

The body of this work is five oral histories conducted over the past ten years with lifelong activists and public intellectuals: Katherine Acey, Dorothy Allison, Suzanne Pharr, Achebe Powell, and Carmen Vázquez. I chose to focus on these five women because their stories dovetailed elegantly into a new narrative about the relationship between lesbians,

feminism, and queer liberation. They are comrades and friends and remain as active in social change and truth-telling as ever. In the chorus behind them are others-- like Ginny Apuzzo, Joan Biren, Amber Hollibaugh, Cherrie Moraga, and Minnie Bruce Pratt-- that I have interviewed and may include in a longer manuscript. That is to say, five personal narratives carry many other voices of shared experiences. My observations and insights are rooted in more than twenty years of interviewing and over ten years of teaching this material to young queers eager for a “retrofitted” narrative.

I chose a format that is perhaps unorthodox to traditional historical narratives but has been increasingly dominant in the field of oral history. Rather than use oral history as a form of evidence that is woven into a master narrative, I’ve decided to let their edited transcripts stand on their own. This decision comes from a democratizing impulse—a desire to let historical actors speak for themselves, while still performing my responsibilities as a historian by placing them in context and offering interpretation, and it is in line with the current best practices in the field. The trend in oral history publishing also follows this model; Palgrave MacMillan and Oxford University Press, the leading academic publishers of oral history, have dozens of titles in their oral history series that follow this design.

Based on my interviews, primary research, and the work of other scholars, I have attempted to craft a new chronology of gender and sexual liberation. It is not complete; no timeline ever is. But my intention was to round out an oft-told chronology of second wave feminism by including key moments in LGBT history as well as milestones in the movement for racial justice. Timelines have an important visual impact, allowing us to literally “view” seemingly separate histories together. Rather than merely a laundry list of victories and interventions, I hope that this compilation offers a new way of seeing how intertwined histories of liberation have been and that they lend support for a recasting of this time period. For some, but not all, the past five decades have been a complicated but interconnected movement for gender, sexual, and racial liberation rather than the silos of civil, LGBT, and women’s rights.

In addition to the chronology, I have included my essay about oral history methodology that was published in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, edited by Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramirez, in 2012. The contributors were asked to select an excerpt from an oral history they had conducted and then write an essay analyzing the excerpt. I chose a segment of a joint interview I conducted with Dorothy
Allison and Carmen Vázquez and I include this essay here because these particular narrators make it salient, but also because part of my contribution to new historical knowledge is about the practice of crafting history, in this case queer history. In the essay, I reflect on what it means to “queer” oral history, raising questions about the possibilities and limitations of the field. Given how much LGBT histories rely on oral histories as our primary (or sole) means of evidence, it is important that we pay attention to the methods producing new narratives.

In conclusion, here are my intentions for this work: to add to our collective knowledge about lesbian lives by sharing five important life narratives, to contribute to a re-imagination of the vast and intersectional scope of second wave feminism and sexual liberation, and to disrupt conventional methods of documenting and sharing history. Out of love, and a sense of justice.
Gender and Sexual Liberation Chronology, 1950-2000

1950 Mattachine Society founded by Harry Hay.

1953 Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* is published. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is published in the United States.

1955 Daughters of Bilitis founded in San Francisco by Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon and others. They published their first issue of *The Ladder* in 1956.

1957 Lorraine Hansberry, African American playwright, is in *The Ladder*.

1959 Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* is published.

1960 Sex education begins in schools.

1963 Pauli Murray delivers the speech “The Negro Woman and the Quest for Equality.”

1964 The Civil Rights Act is passed.


1968 Shirley Chisholm becomes the first black woman to be elected to Congress. Hijas de Cuauhtemoc founded in California. American Indian Movement founded in Minneapolis.


1971  The Furies Collective is established.
The L.A. based periodical \textit{The Lesbian Tide} is published.\n\textit{Asian Women} published by UC Berkeley group to incorporate feminist discourse into Asian Studies.\nThe Women’s Building in San Francisco is established.\nNational Chicana Conference in Houston.

1972  Maxine Feldman records the first lesbian record “Angry Atthis.”\nPFLAG is founded in New York City.\nLos Angeles Feminist Women’s Health Center is founded.\nFirst Lesbian Feminist Conference in Los Angeles is held.\nThe Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers formed in New York.\nThe first issue of \textit{The Furies} is published in 1972.\nDel Martin and Phyllis Lyon co-author \textit{Lesbian/Woman}.\nShirley Chisholm becomes the first major-party black candidate to run for president.\nThe Ms. Foundation for Women is formed.\nAngela Davis is acquitted.\nAsian American Women’s Center opens in Los Angeles.

1973  Naiad Press is founded by Barbara Grier and Donna McBride.\nOlivia Records is founded.\nNational Black Feminist Organization is established in New York by Margaret Sloan and Flo Kennedy.\nNational Gay and Lesbian Task Force founded in New York.\nAlix Dobkin, Kay Gardner, and Patches Attom found the musical group Lavender Jane.\n\textit{Roe v. Wade} legalized abortion.\nHomosexuality is decriminalized as a mental disorder by the APA.\nJill Johnston’s \textit{Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution} is published.\n\textit{Gay Community News} is founded in Boston.\nDaughters Inc. is founded.\nLambda Legal Defense Fund is founded in New York City.

1974  The Combahee River Collective is founded by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and Demita Frazer.\nThe Salsa Soul Sisters is founded from the Black Lesbian Caucus at the Gay Activist Alliance meeting of 1974.\n\textit{Lesbian Connection} is first published in Michigan.\nMexican-American Women’s National Association founded.\n\textit{Quest} is published.\nWomen of All Red Nations founded in Rapid City.

1975  Elaine Nobel becomes the first openly lesbian candidate elected to a state legislature in MA.\nGay American Indians established in San Francisco by Barbara Cameron and others.\n1975-1985 is named the UN Decade for Women, First World Conference on Women in Mexico City.\nSagaris Institute, feminist summer school, held in Vermont.
1976  Sweet Honey and the Rock is established by Bernice Johnson Reagon in D.C. First Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Lesbian Herstory Archives opens in New York City, founded by Joan Nestle and Deb Edel. Conditions literary magazine is established. Women Against Pornography is founded in New York City. Following the San Francisco Women’s Center Conference on Violence Against Women, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media is founded. Asian women United is formed. Second Sagaris Conference on racism and sexism.


1978  The National Coalition of Black Gays (later of Black Lesbians and Gays) is founded, and is one of the first groups to do HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness work in the Black community. Harvey Milk and George Moscone are murdered in San Francisco. Samois, an S/M group for gay men and lesbians, forms in San Francisco. The D.C. Coalition of Black Gays is established. The first “Take Back the Night March” in the United States is organized in San Francisco by the Women against Violence in Pornography and Media. The National Coalition against Domestic Violence is founded in D.C. The Lesbians of Color group is founded in Los Angeles. Faye Wattleton becomes president of Planned Parenthood.

The Horizons Foundation: A Lesbian and Gay Community foundation is founded in San Francisco.
Lyon-Martin Women’s Health Services is founded in San Francisco.

1980  Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is founded by Barbara Smith, Cherrie Moraga, and others at the suggestion of Audre Lorde.
Firebrand Books established.
Combating Racism in the Women’s Movement Conference in Washington, D.C.
The First National Third World Women’s Conference on Violence.
Sapphire Sapphos: a lesbians of color group formed.
Adrienne Rich publishes her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality” and others in Blood, Bread, and Poetry.
The Second World Conference on Women is held in Copenhagen.

1981  This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color is published.
The Lesbian Sex Mafia is founded in New York.
First CDC report on AIDS come out.
The Department of Defense bans gay men and lesbians.
Suzanne Pharr founds the Arkansas Women’s Project.
Gay Men’s Health Crisis is founded in New York.
Encuentro Feminista Latina y del Caribe is formed. First meeting in Bogota.
bell hooks publishes Ain’t I a Woman.

1982  First Gay Olympics (later Gay Games) held in San Francisco.
Audre Lorde’s Zami: a New Spelling of my Name is published.
All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies published.
The Kaposi’s Sarcoma Research and Education Foundation, now known as the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, is formed.
AIDS Project Los Angeles is founded.
SAMOIS is denied use of the Women’s Building in San Francisco.

1983  Alice Walker’s foundational use of “womanism” is published in In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.
National Lesbians of Color Conference.
Civil Rights movement leader Coretta Scott King announces her support for lesbian and gay rights.
Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance is passed in Minneapolis twice, but is vetoed by Mayor Donald Fraser.
Asian Immigrant Women Advocates formed in the Bay Area.
Cherrie Moraga’s Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios is published.
Audre Lorde’s Sister Outsider is published.
The LGBT Community Center in New York is established.
San Francisco closes all gay bath houses.
Ryan White is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.
The National Black Women’s Health Project founded in Atlanta by Billye Avery.
Lesbian Task Force of the NCADV founded by Suzanne Pharr.

1984  
Asian Lesbians of the East Coast formed.  
Berkley, CA, is the first city to extend domestic partner benefits.  
The Working Group is awarded its first grant from the Ms. Foundation for Women to support lesbian issues.  
On Our Backs, a pro-sex lesbian magazine, is first published.  
First international conference on AIDS held in Atlanta, Georgia.  
The S.F. AIDS Foundation produces the first brochure about women and AIDS.  
And the Thick Ones Are Comforters: A Lesbian Mothers Anthology published.  
“Claiming Our Identities,” the 3rd National Third World/People of Color Lesbian and Gay conference, is held in Berkeley, CA.

1985  
Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders founded in Massachusetts.  
Harvey Milk School opens in New York.  
Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi concludes the “Decade of the Women.”  
There is a concurrent NGO alternative conference “Forum 85.”  
The first Desert States Lesbian and Gay Conference is held at UNLV.

1986  
Bowers v. Hardwick rules that homosexual sex is not protected by the right to privacy.  
Pro-Choice March on Washington.  
Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales publish Getting Home Alive.  
The second International Lesbian and Gay People of Color Conference in L.A. takes place. Its theme is “Joining Our Struggles; Making Our Future.”  
The Second Lesbians of Color Conference hosts the “Coming Out and Surviving: A Conference for/by Lesbians of Color” in the San Francisco Women’s Building.  
The Third World AIDS Advisory Task Force is formed.  
Las Buenas Amigas Lesbianas Latinas en Nueva York is founded.

1987  
Act Up is formed in New York.  
Joan E. Biren publishes Making a Way: Lesbians Out Front.  
Gloria Anzaldúa publishes Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.  
Llego, a group for queer Latinos, is formed.  
Second National Gay March on Washington.  
First Lesbian Encuentro takes place in Cuernavaca, Mexico.  
Barney Frank comes out as gay.  
Asian AIDS Project is formed in San Francisco.  
The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is founded in San Antonio by Graciela Sanchez and others.  
The Names Project displays the AIDS Quilt in Washington, D.C. for first time.  
The 3rd International Conference on AIDS is held in Washington, DC and activists march on Ronald Reagan's White House. After four years in office, Reagan publicly addresses AIDS for the first time.  
The third Lesbians of Color Conference is held.  
“Eye of the Storm Productions” a lesbians of color media group is formed.  
“Coming Out and Coming Home,” the Second Annual Third World Lesbians of Color Conference, held in the San Francisco Women’s Building.
First World AIDS Day.
Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Network is founded.
Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum founded.
Asian Women’s Shelter is formed in New York City.
Native American Women’s Health Education and Resource Center founded, Yankton Sioux reservation.

Act Up Demonstration at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York.
Maud’s, a lesbian bar in San Francisco, closes.
Making Waves is published by Asian Women United of UC Berkeley.
“Dynamics of Color: Building a Stronger Lesbian Community, Combating Racism, Honoring Diversity” conference is held for the bay area lesbians in San Francisco.
The fifth Desert & Mountain States Lesbian & Gay Conference “Forging Our Destiny” is held in Salt Lake City, Utah.
Marlon Riggs’ film about black gay men, Tongues Untied, released.

1990  Queer Nation formed in New York.
Approximate beginning of the Riot Grrrl movement.
Judith Butler publishes Gender Trouble, marking the beginning of Queer Studies.
Audre Lorde and Chrystos receive NEA grants.
American Disabilities Act includes AIDS related disabilities.
The Astraea Foundation adds “lesbian” to its name.
Ryan White dies of AIDS.
The first annual Queer Graduate Studies Conference is held.
El segundo encuentro de lesbianas Latinas del norte de California held.
The third International Lesbian and Gay Health Conference and the eighth National AIDS Forum are held in D.C.
The Out Fund for Lesbian and Gay Liberation is founded.

1991  Sharan Kowalski guardianship case – denies custodial rights to partner.
Patricia Ireland comes out.
Audre Lorde named New York State Poet Laureate.
First Black Gay and Lesbians Pride March in D.C.
Ryan White Act passed.
Magic Johnson announces that he is HIV positive.
“The National Lesbian Conference: for, by, and about lesbians” is held in Atlanta, GA.
The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force issues a press release calling for more people of color in movement leadership.
The Task Force’s first “Creating Change Conference” held.

1992  Dorothy Allison publishes Bastard Out of Carolina.
K.D. Lang comes out.
The Lesbian Avengers formed in New York.
Struggle over Amendment 2 in Colorado which recognizes homosexuals as a protected class in Colorado; The Supreme Court voted it down in 1996.
Oregon’s Ballot Measure 9 launched by the Oregon Citizen’s Alliance to forbid government monies be spent on the encouragement or facilitation of homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism, and masochism.

First National Lesbian Conference.
The Lesbian AIDS Project in New York is founded.
The CDC expands its definition of AIDS to include female symptoms.
President Clinton establishes the White House Office of National AIDS Policy.
El Primer Encuentro Nacional in Houston, TX, is held by LLEGO. This the first national gathering for Latina lesbians and gay men to assess the impact of HIV/AIDS on their communities.

1993
“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy on gays and lesbian in the military established.
Leslie Feinberg publishes *Stone Butch Blues.*
First Dyke March.
First AIDS czar, Kristine Moore Gebbie.
National Asian Women’s Health Organization is formed and includes a focus on lesbian and bisexual health needs.
First Lesbian and Gay Leftist Retreat in Delray Beach, Florida.
National LGBT March on Washington.
At the March on Washington, Lesbians with HIV/AIDS lead the ACT UP demonstration and hold a Speak Out at the Health and Human Services to protest the “deadly policies that enforce lesbian invisibility.”
The March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation is endorsed by the NAACP.
The Boston Women’s Health Care Coalition founded.
The “U.S. National Asian and Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Agenda” is crafted.

1994
First Latina Lesbian Leadership and Self-Empowerment Conference is held.
Bill T. Jones and Adrienne Rich receive MacArthur Awards.
The 25th anniversary of Stonewall.
The AMA removes all references to “sexual orientation and related diseases.”
Leadership Lambda’s first Annual Conference is held in Dallas, TX.
The American Association of Physicians for Human Rights holds the Summit on HIV Prevention for Gay Men, Bisexuals and Lesbians at Risk.

1995
Forth Word Conference on Women in Beijing – lesbian groups attend for the first time.
First National Asian Women’s Conference organized by NAWHO.
President Clinton establishes the first Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS and hosts the first White House Summit on AIDS.
The Second Lesbian and Gay Left Dialogue takes place in Pawling, NY.
The National Association of Lesbian and Gay Community Centers convened in November to being their first nation-wide campaign, “Promote the Vote.”

1996
Defense of Marriage Act passed.
Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (welfare reform) passed.
Founding of National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum.
The Audre Lorde Project: A Center for Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Two-Spirit, Transgender and People of Color Communities has an Opening Celebration.
1998  Supreme court ruled in *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services* that same-sex sexual harassment was included in federal work-place harassment laws.
Out of the NGLTF’s Creating Change Conference in Pittsburg the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Transgender People of Color Organizing Resource Exchange is established.
As part of the Audre Lorde Project, Arms Akimbo, the first lesbian, bisexual, two-spirit and transgender women of color organizing institute is founded in NY.

1999  The World Health Organization reports that more African women than men have HIV and AIDS.
“Sex and Gender Liberation Institute’s Creating Change Conference.”
“Unity for Progressive Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People of Color Gathering” is held in Oakland, CA.
Lesbian Rights Summit in D.C.
First National Conference on Gender is held in D.C.

2000  INCITE! Women of Color against Violence is founded.
The United States and the United Nations declare AIDS an issue of national security.
President Clinton reauthorizes the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act, guaranteeing medical services for low income, uninsured, or underinsured people with HIV.
Millennium LGBT March on Washington.
Narrator Biographies

**Katherine Acey** (b. 1950) was raised in Utica, New York. Her grandparents were immigrants from Lebanon and she was educated in Catholic schools, graduating from Rosary Hill College in upstate New York. A highly respected activist best known for her expertise and commitment to lesbian and women's philanthropy, Acey’s inclusive vision of funding has been instrumental in setting a standard for a more progressive, diverse and community-based definition of philanthropy.

In 1987, after serving on Astraea's Board of Directors for four years, Acey was hired as its Executive Director—the organization's first paid staff person. Under her stewardship, Astraea has enjoyed tremendous growth. The Foundation's Grants program has been expanded to fund local, regional and international organizations as well as cultural and media work. In 1990, Astraea established the nation's first Lesbian Writers Fund; and in 1996, Astraea created The International Fund for Sexual Minorities—the only fund of its kind in the U.S.

From 1982 to 1987, Katherine Acey served as the Associate Director of the North Star Fund in New York City. She has been involved in the Women's Funding Network since its inception, serving as both board member and chair. She is also a founding member and past chair of the Funders for Lesbian and Gay Issues and has served as a board or advisory member to countless organizations including: Women in the Arts, the Center for Anti-Violence Education, New York Women against Rape, MADRE and Women Make Movies. Acey is past chair of the National Executive Committee of the Palestine Solidarity Committee, and a member of the Arab Women's Gathering Organizing Committee.

Katherine Acey has traveled extensively in the U.S. speaking on issues of philanthropy, sexual orientation, race and class. Internationally, she has participated in numerous women's and LGBTI delegations and gatherings in Africa, Asia, Central America and Europe.

**Dorothy Allison** (b.1949) grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, the first child of a fifteen-year-old unwed mother who worked as a waitress. Now living in Northern California with her partner Alix and her teenage son, Wolf Michael, she describes herself as a feminist, a working class storyteller, a Southern expatriate, a sometime poet and a happily born-again Californian. Awarded the 2007 Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction, Allison is a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

The first member of her family to graduate from high school, Allison attended Florida


The youngest of eight children, **Suzanne Pharr** (b. 1939) was raised in Lawrenceville, GA. A self-described “white, queer, southern, anti-racist worker,” Pharr has been a social justice organizer since the 1960s. She was the editor of the women’s newspaper *Distaff* and founder of the Women’s Project in Little Rock, AR. She was the first co-chair of the Lesbian Task Force at the National Coalition against Domestic Violence. Pharr was the first female executive director of the Highlander Research and Education Center.

In addition to her organizing work, Suzanne Pharr is an accomplished public intellectual and writer. She is the author of two books: *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation* (1996) and *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1988). She currently resides in Knoxville, TN and is working with Southerners on New Ground.

**Achebe Betty Powell** (b.1940) was raised in Florida, graduated with a B.A. from The College of St. Catherine and an M.A. in French Language and Literature from Fordham University, and has resided in New York City for the past 40 years. Powell has been an activist since high school, when she joined the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Powell was a self-possessed and mature young woman—from her activism, to living abroad with her father, to being one of the only black students at a Midwestern Catholic women’s college.
As an adult, Powell was poised to take leadership in many liberation struggles. Powell was a key player in the Gay Academic Union, the National Black Feminist Organization, and the National Gay Task Force. She was a founding member of Salsa Soul Sisters and the Astraea Foundation. Powell has been a professor at Brooklyn College, a social worker, and an employee at Kitchen Table Press before she went on to diversity and anti-racism training, work which has taken her around the globe in the struggle for human rights and liberation. She currently resides in Brooklyn, NY.

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The oldest of seven children, Carmen Vázquez (b. 1949) was born in Puerto Rico and raised in Harlem. She attended the City University of New York, earning a Bachelors in English and a Master’s in Education. Vázquez lived and worked in San Francisco for almost two decades, becoming a seasoned activist and movement leader in causes ranging from immigrant rights to lesbian health. Vázquez was the founding director of the Women’s Building in San Francisco, the Director of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and the Coordinator of Lesbian & Gay Health Services for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. She was also the co-founder and co-chair of Somos Hermanas, a Central American Women’s Solidarity Network.

Carmen Vázquez returned to New York in 1994 as the Director of Public Policy for the LGBT Community Center in New York City and later became the Deputy Director of the Empire State Pride Agenda. She has published in many journals, magazines, and anthologies and is a featured speaker at activist conferences including the NGLTF’s Creating Change. Vázquez is currently with the New York State Department of Health’s AIDS Institute and lives in Brooklyn, NY.
Gender, Desire, and Feminism: Oral History Methodology
I video recorded this joint interview with Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez in 2007 as part of the Voices of Feminism (VOF) project at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. In 2012, this excerpt and following essay were published in Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History, edited by Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramirez. I’ve included it here because of its implications for the narratives of feminist history and for oral history methodology.

**Interview Excerpt**

November 19, 2007, Guerneville, California.

**KA:** What is butch-femme? Tell me about its history for you.

**DA:** But it changes depending on where you’re standing and when. How old are you, darling? [to Vázquez]

**KA:** You’re both 58.

**DA:** So we’re grownups, more or less.

**CV:** We are, honey.

**DA:** Of an age. And you grew up in New York, right?

**CV:** Yeah. I grew up in New York, in Harlem. I came from Puerto Rico when I was about five, spent about three years on the Lower East Side. And then my family got this great three-bedroom apartment in the General Grant Projects on 125th Street, in Harlem, and I lived in Harlem about 14 years, and then moved to the Bronx.

**DA:** When did you realize who you were?

**CV:** Really, about five or six. There was a little girl, a little German girl that used to taunt me and I wanted to be with her. I wanted to play with her, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to do all those things. But my first sort of conscious experience of sex and sexuality, of being something—I don’t think *lesbian* was even a word that I knew—was when I was 15. I was in some home that I had been sent to for God knows what reason, because I was acting out. And in there, there was a sexual experience with a girl, where I definitely knew that that was not play. I was wanting to kiss that girl, and I wanted to get up on that girl and do all kinds of things to that girl. Still, though, it didn’t have a name, and it was just, like, something that happened. Then there was another relationship, with someone that was about seven years older than me, also a femme, who hung out with other femmes. I was 15 or 16.
DA: You were a pet.
CV: I was. I totally was. And I was taken in by these women, and it was mostly in their home. You know, they’d have parties, and I’d come, and I was the pet, and I was always the boy. Sometimes they’d take me out to, like, these places where you had to have passwords and stuff like that, and it was all very secret and very exciting, completely exciting. I would dress up in my shirts and ties and things, and they took good care of me. I mean, I was never in trouble because they took really good care of me, these girls. So that’s—I mean, that’s my formative experience of what it meant to love a woman and to be involved with a woman. It was a completely Puerto Rican subculture, these lesbian femmes. I didn’t know that they called themselves anything.

DA: There wasn’t even the language.
CV: There wasn’t language that I can recall anyway, but they clearly were that—high-femme at that, with the heels and the tight dresses. And we’d go to the dance clubs. And they’d all have to be worried about how much alcohol I consumed because I was 16 years old, and they could be in a whole lot of trouble, but somehow managed to avoid the trouble. Then, for me, there was not a conscious identity around butch, really, until I left New York. It was in San Francisco that—all of what I talked about earlier in terms of discovering a gay world and then a lesbian community.

DA: And the language?
CV: And the language. But the language then was, like, lesbian and lesbian feminist. I had no idea what people were fucking talking about. I honestly did not. And I did not have a word for myself that was the word butch. I knew that I liked lesbians who looked like my mother.

DA: Yeah, okay. (laughs)
CV: And were girls. Then some language did come around. Okay, so, like, You’re a butch, and you like femmes. And so then I started to incorporate some of that language. But in my efforts to try and find a social life and a political life, and to integrate into the lesbian feminist community, it was horrific. It was horrible, because I had no reference point. Flannel shirts.

DA: Only if they’ve got a lace teddy underneath it.
CV: Oh, baby.

DA: I’ve dated some of those.
CV: I mean, I couldn’t even wear a flannel shirt myself (laughs), much less date a woman who was wearing one. So it was complicated. It was really complicated to try and figure out
what was going on. And there was an awful lot of rejection, and there was an awful lot of,
What are you doing? You know, You’re a traitor, you’re—you know.
DA: Who would say you’re a traitor? Family, friends?
CV: No, no. White lesbians.
DA: Oh for God sake, yeah.
CV: Feminists.
DA: Yeah, I remember.
CV: Take the tie off. What are you doing? And a real push towards an assimilation into
more androgynous lesbian—whatever—presentation, even though that was still never who I
was attracted to or who I ever fucked.
DA: They always read as asexual to me, that whole androgynous thing.
CV: Well, that’s how I read it, too. So that’s sort of about 20 years ago.
KA: How did you know who you were? How did you get to that point? [addressing
Allison]
DA: I figured out really quickly, when I was young, that I was just—in my mind, I was just
queer and—no, we should use the word weird. I figured I was probably sick, I was probably
crazy. But mostly what I figured was that I was wrong. I did not want to get married. I was
not interested in boys. I was not interested in dating. In my family, it was like, Dorothy’s not
like that; Dorothy reads a lot.

But a lot of it was also protective, because I was getting raped on a regular basis. And
by the time I got old enough and strong enough to counter that and more or less stop it, I found
a place of safety, which was to be asexual. But that doesn’t stop desire or fantasy or lust, so
that a lot of my erotic fantasies centered on being trapped with girls in terrible situations in
which I alone could rescue them by performing acts of enormous suffering.

So then a lot of that became a lot of my erotic charge for most of my teenage years. I
would fall in love with girlfriends, and I tended to fall in love with the more butch girls,
although I did not have a language. I didn’t have the word lesbian, except that I read
constantly, and gradually — And then I discovered my stepfather’s porn, and that’s where I
found lesbians. The things I knew about lesbians was that they were rapists and they had hairy
nipples. It was porn that I was getting all my education from. I found that kind of a turn-on.
Big mean dykes. Ooh, where are they? How can I find them? Then I went off to college and
fell into a relationship with one of my resident advisers, and she was aggressive enough to be
interesting, but she really wasn’t my stuff, and to a certain extent, she was kind of androgynous. I fell in love with a Russian student, who was aggressive enough and butch enough to be more of my stuff, but not quite. It took me a long time. But meanwhile, I made do.

**CV:** One has to.

**DA:** One has to. And then I discovered, in the South, old dyke bars, most of which were in bad neighborhoods. And pretty quickly, that’s where I started seeing women who were more my erotic charge. And they looked so good and so scary and, on some levels, were dangerous. Well, but quasi— Mostly what I found out was that, when I found the butch girls, they just all wanted to marry me. (laughs) And I was supposed to do the laundry and the cooking and, you know, tie their ties. And I didn’t want to get married. I had a horror of any kind of marriage entrapment.

One of the things that I ran into really quickly when I did start finding butch girls and having sex with them and dating them, was that they thought I was a slut. And I was, in terms of— I don’t know about the Northeast, but in the Southeast, there’s a real—there’s a culture that disdains women who want to fuck around. A good femme lesbian finds herself a good butch, settles down, and plays house. I didn’t want to settle down and play house. I just wanted to have a really great time and go home; or send them home if they came with me. And so that was problematic and troublesome.

After college, when I found the women’s movement in Tallahassee is when I found the more lesbian feminist androgynous community, and that was— They read. You could talk. I could be a feminist and do organizing, but having sex with them was not satisfying at all, with a few exceptions. There were some good butches hiding under those flannel shirts, but they tended to be more working-class girls, and they tended to be older. And, without fail, they all wanted to marry me. So there would be these constant dramas.

So I had two lives. I had my lesbian feminist life. I lived in a lesbian collective. I was sleeping with a number of women in the collective, and it was okay. Mostly I was fucking them, because it just didn’t work for them. To do me, you had to have sincerity. You know what I mean?

**CV:** I do. (laughs)

**DA:** But they did not know what I was talking about. So I would leave the collective and go to the pool hall and find sincerity, bring her home and then—
Interestingly enough—and problematically enough, especially when I moved further north—I was dating across color, because I found a better quality butch girl. (laughs) At least for a time. Because there was such a huge emphasis on androgyny among white lesbians, it became so asexual to me. And, let’s be clear, not much talent. Because it’s my opinion that the secret to good sex is a willingness to be humiliated, and that means taking some risks. And they were all so hesitant and tentative, and that doesn’t work.

**CV:** They all talked about, why you are a lesbian is because it was safe.

**DA:** For some of them, yeah.

**CV:** Well, girl, that is not what sex is about.

**DA:** No. And I had a huge bent towards being safe. I could organize a lot of safe, because sex was really problematic for me—because I had a lot of resistance to being helpless, but I eroticized it at the same time. So you really had to be committed to have sex with me.

**CV:** And, you know, there’s something else about a butch—well, for me. My understanding and sense of wanting to be with a woman and wanting to take care of her and wanting to please her had very little to do with expecting that they would cook or clean the house, or do any of that stuff. That was not part of the bargain. And I was never interested in femmes that were submissive.

**DA:** Oh, honey, let’s be very clear. I was not submissive.

**CV:** No. I get that.

**DA:** Unless you pushed it, and then I could become instantly submissive.

**CV:** But you know what I’m saying? I mean, culturally, that was not a part of the deal.

**DA:** No. We’re talking about femmes with an enormous amount of authority.

**CV:** Enormous amount of authority, independence, and attitude. And that’s gotten me in trouble. But I was never looking for the one that would take care of me.

**DA:** The little wife.

**CV:** No. I was never looking for the little wife, and neither were the folks that I hung out with. Everything that I’ve just been talking about in terms of a sexual relationship that is charged—and, you know, that has changed completely for me, from, like, charged and I’m the one that’s in charge—thinking that I was the one in charge. Thinking. (laughs) And I’m very happy that I’m not, but it took me a long time to figure that piece out and go, like, Okay, so, really, why it works is because there is an exchange of power; that there is surrender and
submission, but it’s surrender and submission on both our parts. Who’s in charge is not dependent on my identity as a butch or hers as femme.

DA: And it shifts.

CV: And it shifts, but that was not something that I understood consciously and could have even had language for.

DA: Even once I understood it, I couldn’t talk about it, right? What language did I have?

CV: No. Twenty years ago, no. I could not have said what I just said. And it’s evolved for me. And on a very personal level, erotically, it’s been this very gradual sort of moving to a place where I understand that part of my desire to please her involves her ability and her desire to take me. That just was not—that little baby-dyke butch person, no.

DA: Well, when I started finding those bars—starting in D.C., and then in New York—it was just like, I’d just sit with my mouth open. And I would date women who’d say, You know, you mean well, but you spent too long in the women’s movement. I mean, you’ll never be as good at this as you would have been if you hadn’t done that. And to a certain extent, they were right, because I have this whole rebellion against the expectations of high-femme drag. What would work for me is if we were going to be frank about how I can fetishize it. Then I could do it, and enjoyed it and could play with it, especially when I was younger.

Then, as I got older, I started to get annoyed at how much work this involved. But when lust is riding the tide, oh Jesus God. And those girls—man. I remember the first time I was in a dance bar in New York and they played “Thriller.” All of a sudden, all of these women in tuxedo shirts, full suits, and girls in heels so high I couldn’t see how they were dancing, hit the floor, and it was like, Oh mamma. I’m going home to change clothes and come back. Presentation and courage. God, the sexual lure of courage, yeah.

But the lesbian feminist community actively, militantly rejected it and critiqued it and held contempt for it, which meant that a lot of my core stuff I either had to hide or battle for, and at different times I did different things. Early on, especially when I was young, I just took it as a given that there would be only coded ways in which I would be a genuine femme in the lesbian feminist community. That changed over time as I lost patience with them. Especially when I was in Tallahassee and I got some of my working-class butch girlfriends to come to events in the lesbian feminist community. You only had to treat one of my girlfriends bad once, when I became a terrorist. You know, you don’t do that to a woman I’ve had sex with and admire and honor. I’ll rip your throat out. So then I wasn’t so good at hiding for a while.
It got tricky. But it got bad and painful, and a lot of times I felt like a failed femme because I couldn’t live up to the expectations of the community that was my erotic community. Meanwhile, lesbian feminism was absolutely vital to my life, and the work was vital, and I’m meanwhile trying to get them to be just a little bit more accepting, make some shifts there. Dancing on razors all the fucking time. But to get them to actually look at their analysis and see the flaws. And it was all about class and getting them to register class. Well, it’s larger than class, but class is a big piece of it.

CV: The androgynous-whatever thing—that got so elevated and still is. I mean, I think that there has been a period of objectifying and glorifying male identity in women. You know, it’s all well and good if you go out and articulate a defense of butch-femme, and if you can be titillating and you can talk about it and everybody loves it and there’s an audience for it. But don’t you fucking go and actually be that person and expect that you’re going to have any real decision making or power in the movement, because you’re not. This is not a movement that will tolerate male-identified people at its leadership. It never has and never will. So for me, butch-femme is so fundamentally and completely about an erotic signaling that that’s what it is, folks. Here we are in the world and, actually, we fuck.

DA: It’s prudish. It’s also prejudice, the same kind of prejudice that I found when I was a slut. The first thing I discovered is that in a lesbian feminist culture in New York, when all the shit hit the fan, all of a sudden I was again a slut. But I wanted there to be honor for sluts. I wanted respect. We’re acting on desire. I believed that that was a feminist ideal. You know, autonomy of the body, autonomy of lust. Let’s give it some respect and give it its place. But there was a triumph of this asexual androgyny that was really problematic for a lot of lesbians. I sometimes wondered if it wasn’t the compromise made with heterosexuals in early feminism, but that’s too nefarious.

KA: How do you defend or explain butch-femme to the younger generation who feel more at ease with the identities of trans or gender variant?

DA: I don’t think you explain; you model. You talk frankly about desire and your own history. That’s the best way to do it, in order to get them to speak and to feel that they have a safe place to speak. But you have to be willing to be humiliated and to be wrong. I can’t tell you how many times —I did a talk down in L.A. some years ago, and I knew not to answer the question when it was asked. I knew it was going to blow up on me. There was no way around it. And it was that same old question, which is, “Well, how do you feel about the transgender
young?” And, “You know, I read something in which you said that you were dating a woman, and then she started to smell different, and you didn’t want to have sex with her anymore.” I was like, Yeah, well, that’s true. I am an old dyke. And if you smell like a boy to me, you step off of my erotic markers. And the moment when you do that transition, we can be friends and we can be a coalition, but we can’t be fucking lovers. It’s not happening. The immediate response was, “Well, you are prejudiced against transgender people.” I said, “Well, I don’t have sex with them; they’re not my stuff. I’m a dyke. I am a dyke.”

But I can’t stop thinking about it, you know. Because I’ll train myself to be, in many contexts, a dominant femme, an aggressive femme, but that’s not my stuff. My stuff—I want someone who can, you know, make me, take me; it’s safe enough for me to give it up and go down and be taken. There is an exchange. But transgender people assume a different gender position in my matrix. Now that doesn’t mean that doesn’t have anything to do with their right to do this or be this or, in fact, all the cultural complications. I have enough libertarian in me that I actually do fight for the right of people to shift their gender and make those choices. Meanwhile, though, what I’m seeing happening to a lot of butch women is that, it’s almost like a replication of the triumph of androgyny. It’s the triumph of transgender, where all of a sudden young butch women believe that, Oh, there is no butch. There is male or female, and I’m going to shift the matrix.

CV: And I do not accept the notion that the transgender experience is the be-all and end-all of what is queer transgression. In fact, when you make a decision that you will cross over and make the transition from male to female or female to male, you’re entering the binary, baby. I don’t care what anybody says, but it looks straight to me. I do defend completely the right of any individual who feels that they’ve got the wrong body. Go change it. But that doesn’t make you queer. You know?

And I know I don’t want the space that I occupy as a female-bodied person who does identify as male in many ways, to be obliterated. I want the right to live in this female body as a male-identified person, and, you know, to the extent that that space gets shrunk, I get really scared and pissed off, honestly, because why should it be shrunk? What was the fucking point of feminism in the first place if it wasn’t to create a space where women could make this decision about our bodies?

DA: I meet a lot of young women, especially when I go to colleges, who are in some form of transition, are living not really as men, except that they present as men. So on the street,
they get treated as men. That means that they step out of a lot of what happens to women in this culture. But meanwhile, they want to still be in the queer community, and they want the authority and position and—let’s be clear—privilege that we have ascribed to butches in our culture, but they want to erase the concept of butches. Because they do want more—they want to be the primary. They want to be honored because they are gender outlaws, and in some way they have defined butch as not being outlaw enough. And that’s where I get into trouble, because I grew up thinking that the bravest thing in the world is a butch woman, and the second most bravest thing is the femme. [There has to be] a more complicated discussion. Show me what is queer about what you’re doing. And show me how, in fact, it’s feminist, and what does it lay the groundwork for in the future?

This is where I get in trouble.

CV: Well, it’s also interesting that we’re having this whole discussion, right? And some of what pissed us off 30 years ago was the androgyny thing. And now, you know, 30 years later, we’re looking at the dissolution of butch-femme and the evolution of transgender-something.

DA: Long ago I decided, if you’re self-defining as a woman, I’m going to take you as a woman. If you’re self-defining as a man, I’m going to take you as a man. I just think people have the right. What’s troublesome is when they’re self-defining as a man, but meanwhile they want to be taken as queer. I’m having some hard time with it.

CV: And running off with our femmes, damn it. (laughter)

DA: Or snatching up the good butches and marrying them. That’s not an issue for you.

CV: No, baby. (laughs)

DA: And since I’m an old married bitch, it’s not that big a deal. You know?14

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Gender, Desire, and Feminism (Reflections)

Carmen Vázquez, who was my girlfriend at the time, and I flew to San Francisco in November 2007 to spend a few days with Dorothy Allison in her home just north of the city. I had asked Dorothy to do an oral history with me as part of the Voices of Feminism project at the Sophia Smith Collection, a documentation project on feminist activism that included recording over fifty full-length oral histories from a diverse range of activists. It was this project that introduced me to Carmen, with whom I had done an oral history in 2005. She joined me on the trip, in part, because I hoped that I could pair Dorothy and Carmen up for an interesting conversation. They are both the same age, have similar political sensibilities, are both writers and activists, and both spent a fair amount of time in San Francisco and indeed overlapped there during the 1980s. Dorothy is as fervent a femme as Carmen is a proud butch. I was enthusiastic about the rich possibilities for a dialogue about gender, sexuality, and feminism across generation, race, and class.¹⁵

My particular interest for the Voices of Feminism project was in both restoring the central role played by lesbians in feminist activism and complicating the historical narrative regarding feminisms, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, I wanted to explore the silences and mythology around the conflicts over sexuality that erupted during the 1980s, what we now call the “sex wars.”¹⁶ Dating back to the early 20th century, sexuality has often caused conflict among feminists so this was something not entirely new. What were the race and class implications of the attack on radical sexualities, including butch-femme, S/M, and pro-pornography feminists? And what lessons have we learned from these internal tensions that we are now bringing to discussions and policy debates about women and sexuality, including transgender identities and practices? These questions led me to narrators like Cherríe L. Moraga, Amber Hollibaugh, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Suzanne Pharr, Achebe Powell, Joan E.

¹⁵ This conversation was partially inspired by “What We’re Rollin’ around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism: A Conversation Toward Ending Them,” a dialogue between Cherrie Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh, 25+ years prior, about race, class, and butch-femme desire. Originally printed in Heresies, the Sex Issue, in 1981, it is now reprinted in Joan Nestle, ed., The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992).

Biren, Virginia Apuzzo, Katherine Acey and others, including Carmen Vázquez and Dorothy Allison. The ensuing conversations with these narrators are rich and varied, addressing these issues in the context of life-long negotiations over sex, gender, race, and class. They often begin with childhood and proceed chronologically although occasionally I have organized them thematically. This was the case with Dorothy\textsuperscript{17}—she has written about her childhood extensively in her novels and memoir—and so our focus was her activism and sexuality. While I came into this interview, and all others, with a set of open-ended questions, I let her lead in many ways, gently keeping us on track but open to exploring the themes important to her.

In the course of my multiple-day interviews with both Carmen and Dorothy individually, we had covered many topics that I knew had rich overlap: surviving poverty and violence, finding the women’s movement, practicing sexual politics within feminism, experiencing erotic culture and practices, and aiming for a clear understanding of self that was informed by race, class, and solid footing in butch-femme sexuality and culture. Moreover, they have a shared journey of moving from New York to California within five years of one another (late 70s for Carmen, early 1980s for Dorothy) and both spoke of the struggle of adjusting to a west coast community whose politics looked very different from those of New York. While Dorothy’s center of gravity was the leather community and her activism was largely within the realm of culture at this time (after decades of work in women’s centers and battered women’s shelters) and Carmen’s was lesbian feminism and the San Francisco Women’s Building, both encountered the classism and sexual conservatism that created much of the tension we now attribute to the sex wars of the 1980s. Our joint conversation began here.

By the time Dorothy, Carmen, and I sat down for a joint interview, Dorothy and I had spent the better part of three days together and had covered a lot of ground. Carmen and Dorothy had also spent some time together off camera as we all prepared for one last conversation before Carmen and I flew out the next day. In the excerpt included here, we began by talking about butch-femme and its meaning for them over time. They both told stories of young adulthood and realizing “who they are,” shared their journeys through 1970s and 1980s feminism and the ensuing emphasis on androgyny and hostility towards butch-

\textsuperscript{17}Although it feels informal and out of step with academic publishing, I’ve chosen to use the narrators’ first names in this essay because it more accurately reflects the tone of our relationships and conversations with one another.
femme, and reflected on current debates within the lesbian community over trans identities. The excerpt represents the last hour of our taping and has only been edited slightly. We covered topics that have important and provocative implications for the scholarship on feminist movements, particularly the interplay between sexuality and politics.

Representing a generation of butch-femme lesbians, including working class women and women of color, Dorothy and Carmen’s life stories offer important challenges to dominant narratives of liberation politics and sexual freedom. Committed to a radical politic that includes the right to self-definition and sexual expression, Dorothy and Carmen experience themselves as having been marginalized voices in women’s movement leadership, middle-class lesbian feminism, and the neo-liberal leadership of the LGBT community. In the interview, Carmen describes feelings of exclusion from movement leadership because of her insistence on a male-identified presentation, noting the community’s enthusiasm for “titillating” conversations about power and desire yet a reluctance to place masculine women in leadership roles. Similarly, Dorothy describes the immense effort involved in maintaining a double-life—of lesbian feminist organizing by day and the erotic culture of the bars by night. She reflects on the struggle to integrate her worlds, to bring butch girlfriends to her lesbian feminist collective, and to live up to the expectations for high femme within butch-femme culture.

These voices are important correctives to the mythology and scholarship on second wave feminism. Not all self-identified feminists were adhering to the sexual ethos of androgyny or the prescriptive of reciprocal or vanilla sex. For these narrators, and indeed many others, erotic desire was born of a raced, classed, and gendered experience that in many ways collided with a mainstream, sexually conservative, feminist ideology beginning in the 1970s and that is now in an embattled ideological conversation with queer and transgender politics. It would be a mistake to assume that radical, pro-sex or butch-femme sexualities disappeared in the 1970s or that lesbians with these sex practices rejected the language or imperative of feminism. Rather, women like Carmen and Dorothy and many others insisted on and claimed feminism as an identity and locus of their activism despite charges of being anti-feminist, dangerous, or immoral by mainstream movement spokespersons.

For testimony around the complexities of butch-femme culture and desire, see Nestle, ed. The Persistent Desire. For the history of a butch-femme community, see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).
Other key themes that emerge that potentially challenge the mainstream narratives of women’s liberation movements are: the range and persistence of lesbian activism within feminisms, the professionalization of the women’s movement, butch-femme identity and culture versus the imposition of androgyne, and the persistence of race and class in the shaping of desire. We turned to the topic of transgender identities and the implications for categories of butch and femme for the last twenty minutes of our interview and while their observations may be provocative, even problematic for some, the three of us felt it was important to bring a sense of history and a feminist analysis to an issue that is often veiled in silence. Through those lenses, historical and feminist, we were able to draw some important connections between generations. Dorothy and Carmen’s navigation of feminism and gay liberation politics is a rich story that will provide future scholars and activists with new evidence of the complexities of sexuality, class, and feminism.

The remainder of this essay is devoted to exploring my observations about the dynamics of this oral history specifically and raising some methodological questions about queer oral history more generally. Those of us that collect oral history and, moreover, those of us that rely on oral history as primary sources know that this material is invaluable as evidence—evidence of our tenacity, our resilience, and creativity, sometimes of our very existence. The field of queer history is made possible, in large part, because we have been willing to speak—about violent pasts, the terror of homophobia and racism, our secret desires, our strategies for survival. But oral history is not just evidence—and we know this already, as practitioners and as students of the growing field on oral history methodology. Much has been written about oral history as a relationship, the self-reflexive piece of conducting interviews, how to listen effectively and pay attention to this dynamic interaction. For the queer subject and narrator, we often delve into subject matter that other oral histories usually do not, including sexual identity and sex practices. It is not out of bounds then (and it may even be necessary) to ask about earliest sexual memories, awareness of difference around erotic desire and gendered behaviors, coming out and the vulnerability of exposure, and painful memories around family violence and incest.

Given the vulnerable nature of these topics, my intention was to create a safe environment where the narrator felt respected, trusting my intentions, and having a sense of control over the outcome of the interview. For me, one key factor in creating safety is reciprocity. Others have written about the usefulness of self-disclosure at the beginning of the
relationship with the narrator and I can’t over-emphasize this, particularly in the context of queer oral history. I make a conscious effort to share something intimate early on in order to establish some level of vulnerability on my part. For example, because I’m not often perceived to be a lesbian, I make a point of coming out right away. The femmes always read me as gay, as one of them, but butch women often do not. And once I do come out to them, it shifts our interactions entirely. However, what I choose to self-disclose isn’t uniform—it may be coming out but often that isn’t necessary so I may share that I have a young son, or that I’m divorced, that I’m from the south (an important detail for southern narrators like Minnie Bruce Pratt, Suzanne Pharr or Linda Stout because they often feel unfairly judged by northerners), or that my lover is twenty years older than I am. Revealing something private about me creates connection and trust and sometimes the narrator and I find a shared experience.

The existing literature on oral history methodology generally cautions against group-interviews. Typically, and for good reason, we are coached to avoid having someone extra in the room so many of us have shied away from using equipment that requires a technician in order to preserve the intimacy and authenticity of the two-person conversation. When I teach oral history to my students, I insist that they find a way to create that space—no taping in offices, no friends along, no extra relatives in the house, unless, of course, your narrator feels more comfortable with an ally for herself or it’s impossible (and the conditions of interviewing are often out of our control.) An interruption-free environment and an audience of one are optimal. This interview was not that. This may have cost us, but I also think it gave us opportunities. And as public intellectuals on topics of gender and sexuality, Carmen and Dorothy brought a comfort level to the conversation that allowed us to break with traditional oral history training.

For the purposes of this particular project, I believe a collaborative interview worked and its success leads me to believe that group, or collaborative, interviews have the potential to be more productive than dyads in certain contexts. I approached the conversation as an experiment with very low stakes. The intention of the trip to California was to record Dorothy’s oral history and that had been accomplished. A taping with her and Carmen was a bonus. But I also had my concerns. Is it appropriate or ethical to interview your lover? Have we really tossed the notion of objectivity out the window? Is a group interview still oral history? And how could I be responsible to the dynamics between interviewer and narrator in this context? Because so much of the success of an interview depends on the interaction
between the narrator and the interviewer, I was concerned that a trio might not work. I could not control the relationship between Dorothy and Carmen; what if it went poorly? Could I keep all of this in check and still be facilitating a reflective conversation that felt worthwhile?

Dorothy and I had been taping for a few days and the three of us sat down together on the last evening of our trip to Guerneville. We were tired; Dorothy’s partner Alix and her son Wolf were in the next room playing video games; the dogs were going in and out of the kitchen screen door. It wasn’t ideal, and yet it was. Dorothy’s kitchen felt relaxed and easy. We were familiar with one another since it was the end of our trip, we had spent time hanging out at the house with Alix and Wolf, and there was an open bottle of wine on the counter. And so we approached it as a friendly and informal conversation but with a clear sense of structure and agreed upon topics for discussion. I asked them to compare their experiences in San Francisco during the 1980s, to reflect upon their evolution sexually, and to discuss the politics around sex and gender within feminism at the time. While I remain fairly silent in the transcript of the conversation, I provided the opening framework for Dorothy and Carmen and we had agreed on the agenda. During the course of the interview, Dorothy, Carmen, and I each take responsibility for the direction and focus of their discussion.

In this context, a collaborative model was successful and opened up new possibilities. The format was useful in sparking memories. The narrators often helped to fill in information for one another—names or street corners—and compared their recollections. In some ways, it was reading their distinct experiences of the lesbian community in San Francisco against one another that created a more cohesive narrative of fractiousness, professionalization, hostility towards butch-femme and sexual radicalism, and race and class privilege. Dorothy’s tenure at Out/Look and leadership in the Outcasts dovetailed with Carmen’s world of the Women’s Building and political organizing to begin to create a piecing together of this decade in feminism and LGBT politics. My concern, though, was that trios can be a challenge—in any situation. In hindsight, I see that the way that this trio worked was that within this group of three there were many ways in which we became pairs. And it shifted throughout. This kept the power in balance during our conversation and prevented any one of us from feeling outnumbered and therefore timid or intimidated. For example, Dorothy and I have Southern roots, a femme identity, and motherhood in common. Carmen is a Puerto Rican butch from New York. However, Carmen and Dorothy are the same age and share the same class background. Carmen and I are lovers but Dorothy and I had spent the last few days together. And Carmen
and Dorothy can flirt. No side of the triangle ever became too heavy. This allowed us to get at topics that are intimate and controversial. Sex and desire are not easy to talk about—with lovers or with new acquaintances. We all had to take some risks to do so in a way that was honest and compassionate.

In an exchange about safety, submission, and power, Dorothy talks about butch desire to domesticate femmes and pushes back when Carmen calls femmes submissive. And she shares her desire for “sincerity,” a lover who is assertive, dangerous. Carmen talks about the exchange of power during sex and the relinquishing of control. Both women take chances with one another and also begin to chip away at some of the silences around power, control, desire, and misogyny within butch-femme sexuality. While both Carmen and Dorothy have talked publicly about sex and sexual identity in the past, this interview covered new ground. For Carmen, I believe, her vulnerability and rethinking the erotics of butch-femme happened, at least in part, because we were lovers. When we met three years ago for her oral history interview, Carmen and I talked briefly about her former lovers and she shared a few sexual encounters. She was more self-reflective and open three years later and it’s logical. We were strangers in 2005. I was there to talk about politics and activism, and the gender difference between us—her butch to my femme—meant that we played out those roles with one another in the course of the interview. She was flirty and in charge and I was the supportive listener. Our intimacy now has created room for a different and more vulnerable conversation.

While I’m hesitant to generalize based solely on my own interviewing experience, I want to raise some questions regarding the role of gender in queer oral history. I have observed significant differences in my conversations with butch women versus femme-identified lesbians. In my experience, femmes are more apt to confide, to explore places of pain particularly around sexuality, and to talk more openly about past lovers and their own desire. Butch-identified women have been more reticent to discuss past relationships and sexual practices with me and tend to rely on butch-femme modes of behavior to shape our interaction—flirtation, gentlemanly gestures, more bravado, and less vulnerability. Can we apply what we know about gendered communication styles to lesbians? Does gender operate in similar or distinct ways? Was this a dynamic at work in this oral history? What if the interviewer was butch? Were Dorothy and I question-askers and attentive listeners? Were Carmen’s stories declarative and confident in a way that we ascribe to masculinity? Who was vulnerable or silenced? Did my femininity and/or my status as Carmen’s lover open up space
or close it down for either of them? In terms of our self-presentations, gender differences are highlighted—mostly in a flirtatious kind of way—but the performance of self is exaggerated by the presence of the other in the room. Does this raise questions about gender and authenticity, self and performance that look different in a queer context?

Although I was not conscious of it at the time of our taping, as I re-read the transcript I am keenly aware of the way that race dropped out of our conversation about sex and desire. This trio managed to create safety around class, desire, and gender, but not race or racism. We talked about women of color and feminism in the first hour and cross-cultural desire at different times, but for the most part race was only given tentative and indirect attention. Sticking to shared identities of class, generation, and butch-femme where Carmen, in particular, knew there was some common experience to draw on was safer. I regret that I/we had not made race a more explicit part of our agenda for the evening and I see that our silence echoes the larger community’s inability to navigate discussions around race and queer desire.

Shared political sensibilities and investment in butch-femme sexuality led us to the topic of transgender and gender-variant identities. Grounded in current debates within the LGBT community over (relatively) new categories of identity, Dorothy and Carmen shared their reflections on the meaning of trans for butch-femme identity. In her observations about the erotics and the politics of transmen, Dorothy asserts her support of self-determination for transgender people but acknowledges her erotic disinterest. Carmen echoes Dorothy’s critical assessment of transgender expression and queer politics and asks, “What was the fucking point of feminism in the first place if it wasn’t to create a space where women could make this decision about our bodies?” Both narrators offer important, though contentious, observations—grounded in history, experience, and a commitment to gender and sexual freedoms—that are often lost in an ahistorical queer discourse about transgenderism. And in this historical moment, our shared concerns over continued feminist backlash and the homonormativity of the LGBT movement, and an investment in butch-femme sexuality, created something for us to push off of in order to carve out a political stance that was grounded in personal experience. We may think differently on this topic a few years from now, but its key contribution—indeed that of any oral history—is capturing a sense of self, embattled as it is, in the moment.

For an excellent collection of theory and testimony on queer politics and gender, see Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, eds. Genderqueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary (Los Angeles and New York: Alyson Books, 2002).
Queer oral history is still in its infancy as a self-conscious methodology that explores some of the theoretical questions I have raised here, but not as practice. While social historians and community-based groups have relied extensively on oral history to create a narrative of the past, we are only just beginning to look critically at our methods. We are learning as we go—to take risks, to continue to challenge categories and assumptions, to break silences about sex, gender and desire. More importantly, the over-arching questions queer oral historians raise as practitioners—the nature of memory, the construction of self, the meanings of history—continue to push the discipline of history in general in significant directions.
“I was like, Okay, Let’s get organized.”

Katherine Acey

July 2007
It’s nearly impossible to separate Katherine Acey and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice in my mind, though she officially retired as its long-time executive director two years ago. She had been at the helm for over twenty years, during which Astraea went from an annual budget of $100,000 to over $3 million, from local to global, and from being an earnest grassroots effort to a role of visionary leadership in progressive philanthropy as a whole. An activist for over forty years, Acey has brought a fiery spirit, a commitment to social justice, and an indefatigable energy to Astraea. In the year of her retirement from her post as Executive Director, she has been celebrated and feted like no other leader in women’s and LGBT philanthropy.

The founding mothers of Astraea, which included Achebe Powell, gathered in 1977, as the women’s funding movement was just gathering momentum. Faced with the economic and political realities of women’s lives, severe government spending cutbacks, and the lack of substantive philanthropic spending for women’s and girl’s programs, women decided to raise and distribute funds themselves. The women’s movement of the 1970s had raised awareness about the need for control over resources and the pressing needs for public solutions to women’s “private” struggles—reproduction, health, and violence were among the top priorities. Women funding women’s issues were not new—a few groundbreaking women of wealth has supported the suffrage movement generations prior. The women’s funding movement that grew in the 1970s was unparalleled in its class consciousness, in its collaborative approach, and in scope, both in terms of dollars and work.

The beginning of the women’s funding movement was the creation of Women and Foundation/Corporate Philanthropy, an organization created in 1977 after a small group of foundation program officers conducted a survey to determine the amount of funding awarded to women and girls. Their finding, that 0.6 percent of foundation giving went to women and girls, prompted the formation of the group with the intention of supporting programs for women. While the increase in dollars was meager compared to overall foundation giving, a nascent awareness of the lack of resources for women lead to more financial support.

But it was the women’s movement that sparked the creation of women’s funds, the backbone of funding for women. The first of this new wave of women’s funding was the Ms. Foundation organized by Gloria Steinem and others alongside Ms. Magazine. By the early

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1980s, a dozen women’s funds had formed including the San Francisco-based Women’s Foundation, the Philadelphia-based Women’s Way, and the Minnesota Women’s Fund. EMILY’s List, the public women’s fund that supports pro-choice women candidates, also started in the 1980s. The new funds were diverse in scope, organizational structure, and mission. The (then) Astraea Foundation, founded in 1977, was the only women’s fund created to support lesbians, with a particular focus on lesbians of color. Astraea existed solely on volunteer labor until 1987, when Acey was hired as the first staff person. Volunteers raised the funds, produced a newsletter, and made granting decisions.

The founding vision and “core values,” as Acey describes them, mandated a continued intersectional approach, a commitment to anti-racism and feminism, and a grantmaking process that built community and connection. Acey at the helm ensured that Astraea has not only remained loyal to that mission but expanded it—to include international work and a commitment to the transgender community. In 2012, Astraea gave over $1.3 million in grants, globally and locally. Taking Astraea from an all-volunteer and regional fund to an organization that funds worldwide initiatives, has a paid staff of twenty, an annual budget of over $3 million and calls itself the largest lesbian foundation in the world is the legacy of Katherine Acey. She writes,

In 1977, a small group of women created a multi-racial, multi-class, feminist foundation in order to address the lack of funding for women—specifically lesbians and women of color. We believed that even the smallest of gestures, when combined, could be a catalyst for women’s empowerment and for significant social change. A quarter of a century later, Astraea is regarded as a dynamic and forward-thinking global foundation, with a penchant for risk-taking shared with many of our sister funds.21

In addition to building Astraea, Katherine Acey has invested substantial time into developing the networks of both women’s and LGBT funds. She was part of the creation of the Women’s Funding Network, along with philanthropic leaders such as Gloria Steinem, Helen LaKelly Hunt, and Tracy Gary, established in 1985 to support and strengthen women’s funds, provide leadership and guidelines around issues of diversity, and to create a system for information sharing and problem solving.22 At the time of the Network’s creation, there were approximately 35 women’s fund in operation. Following the Network’s first conference that year, more were established. After the 1995 UN Conference on Women, the Network raised

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22 Ibid. p. 15.
$45.1 million.23 Today, the Women’s Funding Network funds invest over $65 million a year. Astraea, along with the Ms. Foundation, the Global Fund for Women, and the San Francisco Women’s Foundation, has been integral to the development of the women’s funding movement through the sharing of resources, sharing of knowledge, and leadership development.

Integrating LGBT issues into philanthropy has been more of a challenge, according to Acey. As one of the founding members of the Funders for LGBTQ Issues, she has been part of the effort to support LGBT grantmakers and bring LGBT concerns and programs into mainstream philanthropy. The Working Group on Funding Lesbian and Gay Issues (their working title from 1982-2000 before incorporating as Funders for LGBTQ issues in 2000) was formed in 1982 at the annual National Network of Grantmakers conference.24 They received their first grant in 1984 from the Ms. Foundation to research grantmaking support for lesbian issues. Over the past three decades, this network has helped secure millions of dollars for LGBTQ organizations.

While Acey’s impact on philanthropy, particularly for lesbians and women of color, is undeniable, her activism over the past forty years has not been limited to grantmaking. Acey has always been a natural leader and she got an early start, serving simultaneously as an elected student leader as well as rabble rouser. Alongside her early career start at the North Star Fund, Acey first sought out socialist study groups and formed the Catalyst collective. Her feminist consciousness and lesbian identity formed alongside one another once when was entrenched in activism in New York City. Acey’s activism became firmly entwined with feminism during her work with New York Women Against Rape and the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA); this is when she started to “piece it together.”

New York Women Against Rape (NYWAR) was founded in 1971. Like similar organizations around the county, NYWAR was formed by women’s liberation activists who wanted to raise awareness about violence against women. Initially, the group, first named the Women’s Anti-Rape Group, held speak-outs and wrote a rape handbook. NYWAR’s style and organization were intentionally feminist—lack of hierarchy, collaborative, and offered a peer-support model of counseling in addition to providing direct help to rape survivors, such as

\[\text{Ibid. p. 20.}\]
\[\text{LGBTQ Funders website, 7/21/2010. www.lgbtfunders.org}\]
medical and legal referrals. Ultimately, NYWAR disbanded in 2000 as a result of intra-group conflict and inadequate funding.25

CARASA, like New York Women Against Rape, was a grassroots women’s liberation effort addressing women’s physical autonomy and struggle against violence. CARASA, which was formed in response to the Hyde Amendment of 1977 that ended federal Medicaid payment for abortion, was particularly attuned to the politics of race and class. The group thought of themselves as a socialist organization, placing women and reproduction in the context of economics and power; they worked to ensure that even the poorest women had access to reproductive technologies as well as the financial support to raise children if they chose to. Because of their commitment to women of color and a socialist framework, CARASA was a natural fit for Acey during the late 70s and early 80s. At a time when reproductive politics was largely reduced to language of “choice” post Roe v. Wade, CARASA widened the framework by coining the term “reproductive rights,” and by articulating objectives that included safe and affordable access to abortion and contraception, as well as broad-based government support for poor women and children.26 In addition to honing an “intersectional” analysis and cutting her organizing teeth at CARASA and NYWAR, Acey also found a community of lesbians and a place to begin to explore her sexuality. Like many anti-violence and reproductive rights organizations, these New York City groups were organized and led predominately by lesbians and bisexual women, although a “queer” lens was not yet incorporated into the analysis or the population served.

In 2002, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, a national activist group formed in 2000 at the first Color of Violence conference held in Santa Cruz, CA in 2000, held its second gathering in Chicago. Over 2000 women of color attended. Katherine Acey was one of the keynote speakers. This gathering represents the kind of cross-issue movement building that has been Acey’s hallmark at the Astraea foundation. INCITE!, and the Astraea Foundation that has helped to support their work, has insisted that we cannot talk about LGBT liberation without talking about racism; that we cannot disentangle violence against women from economics; that state-sponsored oppression and women’s private lives are interconnected. In her remarks, Acey talked about her multiple identities as a working-class

Arab woman, a feminist, a lesbian, and a socialist. She drove home the point that social justice work must embrace all identities, values, and passions, much like visionaries such as Audre Lorde did more than thirty years ago. She argued, for example, that the audience must speak out against the brutal military occupation of Palestine, that anti-violence activists in the United States must hold our own government accountable for state-funded violence internationally.27

To the same end, Acey is one of the organizers of a new project, Arab Women Gathering, a national group of women in the beginning stages of forming a community, and potentially their own organization. Though she has formally stepped away from the world of progressive philanthropy, it is evident that grassroots initiatives led by lesbians and women of color have become viable, even central, to social justice movements around the globe because of Katherine Acey’s stewardship of Astraea.

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Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted July 19, 20 and 29, 2007, with:

KATHERINE ACEY

by: KELLY ANDERSON

Brooklyn, NY

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Katherine Acey, at her home in Brooklyn, on July 19th, doing an oral history for the Voices of Feminism project of the Sophia Smith Collection. So, you ready?

ACEY: I'm ready.

ANDERSON: Good, okay. So let's start by talking about your family. I know you were raised in Utica, born in ’50. Tell me what you know about the generations that came before your parents. How did both sides of your family get to the United States and upstate New York?

ACEY: Okay. Well, on my paternal side, both of my grandparents are from Lebanon, they were born there. Their clan began to migrate in the early 1900s. Both my grandparents came from very large families in Lebanon. Most of their immediate family came over, not all. Some ended up coming over in, I think, the late ’50s and ’60s. So some were left behind. My mother’s father was also from Lebanon, and her mother was American born, was an only child of an Irish mother, and we really don’t know anything about my grandfather.

Both my parents — my mother came from a family of seven, and my father a family of nine. A very close extended family I grew up in, with both sides. Both my parents came from working-poor families. My father’s family was a bit more advantaged economically. My dad had a high school education and a little bit of college, a couple of courses. My mom never graduated from high school, and she and her siblings, as I said, they grew up very poor. My grandfather was not in the house from when they were young. He was also an alcoholic, so it was a big hardship. But my great-grandmother lived with them, and so I think that’s how they made it. Growing up, I was very close to my aunts and uncles.

ANDERSON: Do you know why they went to Utica when they immigrated here?
ACEY: There were already some Syrian and Lebanese folks there, and so it was one of those things, I believe, where, you know, there’s some people from your town or your village, and so you start to go there. They’re Christian, so there’s a big community of Syrian — and more Lebanese than Syrian — but that grew up there, and then community developed.

What was interesting about Utica — my experience growing up in the ’50s and ’60s — is that, like many other cities, neighborhoods were very ethnically and racially defined, but the Arabs — the Lebanese and the Syrians — did not have a neighborhood. Many of my family lived on a periphery of Italian neighborhoods, and I’ve always had this speculation that that’s who they looked most like. You know, the Mediterranean, the olive skin, dark hair. How community developed in Utica, with the Lebanese community, was around church. That’s where people really saw each other, congregated, and went from there. So I always felt it as both a religious and a cultural experience growing up.

ANDERSON: So that’s what you know about your grandparents, and how your families got to Utica. And how did your parents meet there? Were they in the same community?

ACEY: My father was five years older than my mom. My mom was friends with some of my father’s sisters, who were more her age. So my father was in the service — this was during World War II. He never saw action but he went into service as a teenager. When he came back, my mom was hanging around the house, but he didn’t pay much attention. He would tease and flirt with all the girls. He was quite charming, my father, but didn’t pay much attention seriously, and I think my mom had a big crush on him. So that’s how they first met. He promised to take her to the movies and then he forgot, and he went on a date with someone his own age, and she felt very bad. So they went back and forth. They were married in ’49, when she was 20 and he was 25, and they were together until her death in ’83.

ANDERSON: So that’s 30 years?

ACEY: They were together — I think it was about 33 years.

ANDERSON: Wow.

ACEY: I believe it would have been their 33rd anniversary, or their 34th.

ANDERSON: And how would you describe their marriage?

ACEY: I think they were very much in love, and they were also very fun loving. My mom worked from when my sister and I were toddlers, but because all the relatives lived in close proximity as I was growing up, my grandmother and my mother’s unmarried sisters lived across the street. So they really helped, because my mother had two babies, one right
after [the other]. My sister and I are, like, a year and five days apart, and there’s only two of us.

And so when I was still a toddler, and my sister, my mother went to work, and she went to work out of necessity. My grandmother — my maternal grandmother — took care of my sister and me, and we spent a lot of time, until she became ill when we were about seven and eight years old, or maybe eight and nine. She died when I was 11. It was the first big, traumatic loss that I experienced. I was very close to her. She spoiled us shamelessly, but she disciplined us too, so she was like my second mother.

But my mom and dad, you know, they loved to dance, they were very social. My mother was a coordinator. You know, they struggled all in their early years, and so it wasn’t tension free and there were economic challenges, but because they both came from very large families and we were close, there was a lot of family support, taking care of the kids. You know, I probably, growing up, probably saw most of my family on a weekly [basis], if not every other week. There was a lot of group dinners, group picnics, people in and out of the houses. Sometimes — you know, as you get older, sometimes it’s a little suffocating, but I always appreciated it, and I think as I’ve aged, I’ve appreciated it even more.

ANDERSON: Tell me about some of the values that you grew up with. What did your parents care about and what kind of people did they want you to be? What kind of values did they instill in you and your sister?

ACEY: Well, you know, my parents, I think, were very smart and very caring, and simple, in a very positive way. Family was very important to them. Church was very important to them. They were not formally educated, but very smart people and worked very hard. I feel what I got from them was a lot of caring and a lot of modeling about caring, a lot of modeling about being good to people. You know, to their family but to other people. A sense of fairness. I feel some of my early activism was, you know, based on my upbringing and just seeing how caring they were.

I remember being in grade school. We went to the parish Catholic grade school and then to the all-girls Catholic high school, but it was all, like, in the neighborhood. Even though where we went to school, most of the kids were working class — anywhere from poor to lower-middle class — there was always someone in our classrooms that didn’t have as much as we had, and I remember my mother always putting together packages of clothes and sometimes even food. So I just learned that, you know, you really try to help people, and I also experienced — Like with both my grandmothers. You know, when they had many children, and they both worked their whole lives — cleaning ladies, factories, and as they got older, how much — You know, my maternal grandmother, as I said earlier, got ill, and there was no question that she would live with us — and then my aunt. And that,
even when she had an apartment, I remember both parents, the families would contribute five, ten dollars a week, and bring it to their mothers. And sometimes if a brother or sister didn’t have, they’d make it up for the other one. So I just — you know, it was never talked about, you just did it.

I remember one time, my mother — we went over to see my grandmother, and she opened up the refrigerator, and she was just — she started to cry, and she realized her mother didn’t have any food in the refrigerator. It was like, How could this happen, since they were in and out of each others’ lives? She immediately went out, filled up the refrigerator, and it never happened again.

My father was the disciplinarian, and my mother was the one you could get over on differently. My sister and I both had a very, very close relationship. We adored my mother. She had us when she was young. I remember when we were in high school, we would walk around, go shopping together, and it used to be like, Oh, your sister. So she kind of loved that. So I felt like I grew up in this family that really was caring. You know, I didn’t always like them when they made me do things I didn’t want to do, or wouldn’t let me do certain things, which was more the case with my dad.

ANDERSON: Was he strict with you?

ACEY: Yeah, my father — he was very loving but very strict. So, you know, I had curfews that were earlier than my friends’. We had many political fights, and many fights around religion. We just pushed each other’s buttons. I was, you know, a difficult teenager, and I was always challenging something, and my sister was similar but in a different way.

But they always gave us what they didn’t have. My father always wanted to be a musician, so from early on, first the nuns taught us piano — group lessons — and then we went and got private piano lessons. And I know that he worked extra so we could have those piano lessons, even though they were only two dollars a lesson in those days. We took dance class. So it was like they were trying to give us things that they didn’t — You know, there was always food on the table. My mother loved to shop, even if she couldn’t afford it. We always had really nice clothes, but it wasn’t extravagant. You know, we had simple family vacations. We’d go to upstate New York, like Lake George or to these other places closer by. So we never went on big, extravagant vacations, but there was a lot of togetherness.

ANDERSON: What were their politics?

ACEY: They were both registered Democrats and, I would say, in many ways very liberal, in other ways more conservative. You know, you didn’t get divorced, even though, you know, some of their brothers and sisters were divorced. You didn’t have sex before marriage; you didn’t have an abortion. So in those ways, they were very —
We were Maronite because of our Arab heritage — our Lebanese heritage. We were actually Maronite Catholics. In those days, growing up, Maronite Catholics were part of the Catholic Church, but you also had to go by other rules. So there was that adherence. At certain points we went to the parish church too, which was more Americanized and more multi, but mostly we went to the Maronite St. Louis Gonzaga Church and, you know, the Mass was in Arabic and Latin. So they — Church and religion, faith. So they weren’t like fundamentalists in that sense, but faith and church and those laws.

I mean, my father, to the day he died, even though the pope said it was okay to eat fish on Friday, my father never did. It took us a long time to convince him that he could go to communion without going to confession. So even as some of the church rules changed, he stuck to you know, certain —

But he was also very loving. I’m very grateful. You know, my mom died when she was 54 — I was in my early thirties — but my father lived to be 82. My mom was really the buffer. She was a buffer between him, particularly when I was a teenager and went off to college. I mean, as I became very radicalized. It started before I left home, and it continued. So in many ways, my father was very proud. You know, his daughter is going off to college. I was a student leader in grade school, high school, college. He was very proud of that. But I think in some ways, as my politics became more and more defined, and more radical in his eyes — and they were radical — I really came to believe that he saw it as somewhat a rejection of him. His feelings could get hurt very easily, but it came out as anger, and I think I’m that way too, and so we just would, you know, lock horns. It just kind of would manifest itself.

You know, he really adored us. I mean, I began to appreciate that more. I always felt loved. I didn’t feel understood. I think as he got older and I got older, we found ways to be with each other that were different, and then the buffer wasn’t there. There was no one — my mom wasn’t negotiating that relationship. We had to do it ourselves.

So I think it was interesting, because in some ways, when my mom died — and I loved both my parents, but I was attached to my mother in a very deep, visceral way, because I felt she was the only person in my whole life that understood me. And in some ways she did, even without talking. You know, it was also a deep, deep connection that wasn’t — always had to be articulated. So I think with my dad and I, we really evolved into a very different kind of relationship, less provocative. We listened more to each other. We learned how to say we were sorry to each other.

ANDERSON: How did you understand your family’s immigration experience and race and your ethnic background as a child? How did you talk about that as a family?

ACEY: Yeah. Well, I’m very sad I do not know how to speak Arabic. My mother grew up in a mixed family, so they didn’t know how to speak
Arabic, but my father’s family — So I was around Arabic with my father’s family, with that extended family and church. You know, I can understand a certain amount of it, but I’m not at all fluent. It’s a sadness. You know, I’ve thought a lot about this over the years, because I was very aware that we were different.

ANDERSON: From who?

ACEY: There was just — you know, I’m not always certain, because it was a mixture. You were different, but you’re not that different, and I’ll kind of talk a little bit about it. It’s very tied to church, religion, Catholic school.

The way I’ve been able to kind of figure it out — and some of it in discussion with my father and some with aunts and uncles, but also with friends and others — is that my parents, their parents, and then some of their siblings and them lived through the Depression, and then came World War II. When you think about what the ’50s and the ’60s were, when my parents were kind of maturing themselves, they were young people. In the ’40s they were teenagers. Everything was very pro-American. Everything was anticommunist. Everything was, you know, It’s great to be an American, freedom.

From what I can gather, both reading and talking to people, and then just observing and listening to my family’s oral histories, it was a big, big assimilation. You came from Lebanon, you came from Syria, you came from Italy. There weren’t big migrations of communities of color per se. There were certainly — You know, [where] I grew up, there was a very big African American population, and also Puerto Rican population. Very few — I mean, I think it was my whole life growing up — Asian in Utica. Now it’s different, very different. There are big migrations now of Asian, more Latina and eastern European, and also Bosnia. So Utica looks very different today than when I was growing up.

I think in terms of ethnic and racial identity, clearly we knew we were Lebanese. You know, what my grandmother cooked, where we went to church, the clan — you were Lebanese. But also, my parents and their siblings married many different nationalities, and mostly Europeans, with the next generation a little different, and now, the [next] generation — my first cousins’ children — it’s like, it’s, you know, they’re African American, they’re Puerto Rican, Native American. So it’s a very — the family’s really very diverse.

It was not as diverse for my parents’ generation. They either married Europeans — a lot of Italians. My father used to say, and it kind of goes back to what I was saying, it’s like, I think they were most closely ethnically identical. You know, I don’t think it was like they said it. This is my theory, because all of my father’s sisters, all six of them, and one brother, married Italians.

ANDERSON: Well, that’s who you were in close proximity with in the neighborhood.
ACEY: Right. And my father married someone who was part Lebanese and Irish, and then his other brother married a woman who is German and English. On my mother’s side they married — there’s a lot of Italians and also other Lebanese. So I feel there was a very big assimilation, push. So it was not important to teach your children to speak Arabic. You were an American. Also I learned very young in the ’50s — as an adolescent, I started to get more politically active in different ways — is, you know, very anticommunist. And then, of course, the civil rights movement.

So there was all of that together, and so I had a sense that I was different, and it came from different places. I think partly the family. At school I wasn’t made fun of, but, you know, people would comment that — both families — that, You have olive skin. It’s funny, the first time I heard it — and I don’t even remember how old I was — but I thought of olives as green. You know, they have those green olives with the red inside, and I would look and say, “Green?” You know, I couldn’t figure it out. I had very curly, bushy hair that was a little different.

It was really clear that there was a black and a white. So I had this thing growing up where, Am I black or white? And clearly the message was, You’re white; you’re different but you’re white. It wasn’t until I actually went off to college that I began to — Because when people would ask me, I would say, well, “I’m Lebanese” or “I’m Arab.” I didn’t identify as much with the Irish. Irish meant Catholic to me, in a certain way, so it was all kind of mixed up. I either wouldn’t identify or I would say I was universal, or I would say I was white, of which I have, you know, some shame. But I have an understanding — because I do identify as nonwhite, as a person of color, but I kind of came into that through a certain political — not even through feminism, but somewhat through feminism, and that shifted for me.

ANDERSON: Did they share stories or culture or any other piece of the Arab heritage that was important growing up? Even though to the outside world you were assimilating, was there a strong sense of pride about where they came from in the home?

ACEY: There was a really strong sense of pride and, again, it got very connected to traditions of family, it got connected to church, it got connected to food. I mean, the food was a big thing. My grandmother — my father’s mother — was a great cook, and some of her daughters had followed in her footsteps. So there was always Lebanese food being cooked, and bread, homemade breads, thick, thin. She always lived in a small apartment, but she always cooked mostly for the (inaudible). So sometimes, you know, families would go and you would have dinner with her, but then your cousins would be coming up the stairs and they’d have pots. They would come and they’d get their meals and they’d go. It was kind of a weekly — I mean, she didn’t do it
every day, but she cooked a lot after she stopped working, and the kids — my aunts and uncles — were helping to support her and take care of her.

ANDERSON: What did you learn about being female in that family and community? What were the messages about gender?

ACEY: Yeah. Well, you know, it was a mixture of messages and double messages. Many of my aunts worked, and some of them had been working — My mother started working when she was 16, and they were all still living at home. They were helping to support the mother, the household, the younger ones coming up. So working was — Women worked. They might not make as much as the men, but they worked.

Actually, my mother — even though I mostly grew up with my cousins but also, you know, [I was] in school with other kids who were anywhere, as I said earlier, from poor to lower-middle class. A lot of the mothers didn’t work, and they owned houses, modest houses. So I was very aware that some of my friends’ mothers didn’t work. You know, like their father was a cop or they owned a little grocery store, but my mother worked, and I remember feeling resentful. Why isn’t my mother home when I get home from school? Why do I have to go home and wash the dishes? So I kind of felt bad sometimes, but then, you know, as I got older and my mother helped me get a job and I saw how loved she was. She was a head cashier at a grocery store, in a big chain. She kind of moved up as clerk.

But also, I saw that, well, some of the women and my aunts were under the thumb of their husbands, and some I liked and some I — There also were very loving relationships, and the women were strong, they were the organizers. My mother organized everything. My mother, she was kind of the middle child in the family but she was also kind of the matriarch. And I saw that my grandmothers, both my grandmothers, I never —

You know, my father’s mother — here she was ruling the roost. Her husband had been dead. My [maternal] grandfather was still alive but estranged, so I didn’t see much of him. As I said, he was an alcoholic, but my grandmother never talked bad about him. I was taken by her sometimes, but also by my parents, to see him if he was sober. His children, even though he was not a very good father to them, they always made sure he was okay and where he was. But it was, you know, it’s like, these women, who were running households, organizing, going to work, raising kids.

ANDERSON: So you saw women as strong and resourceful.

ACEY: I saw them as strong, but I also knew, like in my own — that my father, the firm one, my father, you know, my mother would go round about him. I saw how she would get around him, not only in relationship to us
but in relationship to other things. She wasn’t a very good money manager, but he let her manage the money. (chuckles)

ANDERSON: Did they value education for girls?

ACEY: Well, absolutely. As I said, it was very important to go to school. It was very important to do well in school. It was important to have these other things like dance classes and piano, so to have everything they didn’t have. I always assumed I was going to college. I don’t remember any big discussions, You’re going to college. I have to check with my sister, because I don’t feel like I was ever discouraged, but I can’t remember being encouraged. It just was, like — happened. It was, like, not a question.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: Now the interesting thing — because we both went to an all-girls high school, which happened to be in the same parish school. You had to pay a small tuition, and if you couldn’t afford to they would help you. So when we were in high school, the recruiters mainly came from Catholic girls’ colleges. So that’s the thing. Some of my classmates — there were seventy-some of us — did go to some of the state colleges, but the majority of us, we went to, pretty much, Catholic women’s colleges throughout New York State. There was Saint Rose College. What’s that Catholic girls’ college up in Poughkeepsie? I ended up going to Rosary Hill in Buffalo, where my sister followed me a year later. So that was the other thing you didn’t talk about, but that’s who came and recruited us, and you just went to this all Catholic girls’ college.

ANDERSON: That sounds like you were already being a little rebellious around religion by the time you went to college. So did you consider rebelling in terms of that?

ACEY: I was actually somewhat religious, and thought I was going to be a nun, which is a fairly normal thing for a girl, a young woman, that’s gone to Catholic schools and then an all-girl Catholic high school, because the nuns were feminist role models. Now some of them were mean as hell, but others were just —

You know, I was very heterosexually identified, but I was in love with some of them. I would be like, you know, so smitten, and very involved in grade school and high school. So the nuns were another role — Here are these women, and plus, look, they’re wearing those great habits. That was just so cool, those habits, and then they would go off into that convent, and what was going on in there, you know? It was like all this mystery, and a lot of them were very young. There were some old, and I had some big run-ins. My mother did have
to go to both my grade school and my high school on a number of occasions.

ANDERSON: Did you see it as erotically charged? Because you talk about as if it was a little.

ACEY: You know, it was like — there was something about that, you know? They’re all together, and the habits were — You know, when they went to those street clothes, I tell you.

Many of the girls were smitten with them. And so in grade school, and then when I first — Because I was very smitten with my seventh- and eighth-grade teachers too — nuns. When I was in seventh and eighth grade, I just really, totally loved these two nuns. The rules were very harsh, and so they couldn’t really associate with the students, you know, within the school setting, in front of the church on Sunday mornings. But they were allowed, I think, something like an hour or two every Thursday to go for a walk. So my mother — and this was after school — she would fix cookies, sometimes sandwiches, and they would sneak, these two nuns would sneak over to our house, and some of my school friends, and we’d have this time with them. But then they had to sneak back, because they would get in big trouble, that they had done that. Now, of course, it’s so changed, but pretty much through high school that was the case.

ANDERSON: So you really thought you were on this path.

ACEY: There was a period — and I think it might have been eighth grade, maybe seventh, eighth grade, first year in high school — where I went to church every day, I went to Mass every day, and I was going to be a nun. But I had kind of this devilish streak to me too, and I was friends with these different nuns, and I think some of them thought I was going to be a nun too. And then as I got older, I think a senior in high school, I was seeing somebody. So I said, I think I’ll go to college first, then I’ll be a nun.

ANDERSON: You mean seeing a man, a boy.

ACEY: I was seeing a guy. So then my plan was, Well, let me just — I’ll do this. There was an older gal, who was actually a lesbian, who was four years ahead of me. She was in high school and I was in eighth grade, and we became friends, because the high school was right there. So I was friends with some of the older girls, and some of them were friends with some of these same nuns, and it was kind of like this little cabal, so. She went away to be a nun, and she was a smoker, and by then I was smoking, and I thought, Well, you know, if Georgina can smoke and give it up and go be a nun and give up boys, well, I can do that too. But I said, I think I’ll delay it, because I don’t think my parents were that keen on it either. My parents — It’s interesting. They didn’t
encourage it or discourage it. So then by the time I was in my first year in college I was like – done. But we had this wonderful priest on campus, and so I still went to church. We had this Mass now, you know, guitars. The liturgy was different. It was still the civil rights movement — a different period of it — and the antiwar movement, and he was out there in front on all of that, and I became a student leader.

So then it was like, well, the going to Mass became this community thing, and then eventually, I just drifted completely away. I wanted to sleep in on Sunday morning, you know, and I completely drifted from church, which caused a huge, huge rift with my father and I, when I stopped going to church. I stopped going to church, and then when he would come to visit me when I was in college, I would have all this antiwar literature, all this socialist and communist literature. I didn’t join any of the left parties, but I was involved in all of that. I never wanted to join, it never seemed to fit, but I would go to all those different meetings, be organizing the antiwar demonstrations, the student strikes. We would be going, you know, in defense of the Black Panthers. So he just thought I was lost. That I had a good heart and I was susceptible to these kinds of things and I was going to get in trouble and get hurt. And then not going to church — it was like he could never grasp that.

ANDERSON: And I think they must have been surprised that that could have happened at a Catholic college, right?

ACEY: (laughs) Well, the other very sad thing that happened when we were in college — Rosary Hill’s campus was a mile outside the city limits, and there was very limited transportation, and so when the buses stopped running, we would all hitchhike to go out and do whatever. My sister and her roommate were hitchhiking one night and they were kidnapped. They were taken to a remote spot, and they let the roommate out and they kept driving. So my sister was brutally beaten and raped.

ANDERSON: That’s horrible.

ACEY: It was quite horrible. It still is horrible.

ACEY: So I think they — after that, they suffered no illusions about the safety of a Catholic girls.

END TAPE 1
ANDERSON: How did you get into activism in college?

ACEY: Okay. You know, I became active. I was kind of an activist in terms of school politics from junior high and high school. There was a lot happening in the ’60s. You had the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement.

ANDERSON: How were you made aware of all those? Did your family talk about it? Was your high school engaged with those issues? Did you watch the news?

ACEY: You know, we were a small town, so there wasn’t a lot of organizing that I was aware of. Television was a big factor in terms of the war and civil rights. It was talked about at home, but it wasn’t — you know, I have a dim memory of it. I think I was already inclined to just be involved in changing things. So it might have been the dress code at school or, you know, if you could roll up your uniform or have it above your knees. It was kind of very situational and close-to-home things.

But I remember when I was in eighth grade — and I remembered years later. I feel like I came to my feminist consciousness very late. I think my politics growing up were most guided by race and class, and not from a deep analytical place, [but] from a lived experience, particularly the class stuff. I was very aware of having enough but having less.

Even the schools I went to. The Catholic girls’ high school I went to was the working-class Catholic girls’ high school. Where all the what we thought of as the rich kids went — but when I look back, you know, some weren’t that rich either — was up the main street, up on a hill, surrounded by beautiful homes and lots of grass and trees and lawns, and ours was down in the city, and there were those distinctions.

But there was only one boys’ high school, so there was always competition for the boys. Again, religion was big, the Catholicism, and for me, then, layered with the Eastern Maronite and the Arab and Syrian and Lebanese communities. But I remembered long after — in probably one of my feminist study groups, of which there were many — that in eighth grade I was nominated in the class to be the class president. Right away the teacher said, “No, Katherine can’t be the president, it has to be a boy.” I ended up being elected to vice president, but the boy, who was very nice, was very shy, and so I had to do all the speeches. I had a friend who was a good writer. She was going to be a writer when she grew up, and so she would write my speeches and I’d edit them and then I’d say them, and Patrick would never have to speak in public, which worked for everybody. Long after that, I remember feeling badly that I couldn’t be president, but I didn’t connect it to, well,
he’s a boy. You know, I didn’t have that kind of consciousness, because I also felt like I could do what I wanted to do.

That changed a bit in high school, because I was with all girls, so you didn’t have that. So I was a student leader throughout high school: president of the class, president of the student body, which got me to think that, Well, some day I’m going to be — I never thought I was going to be president of the United States, but I thought I would be a senator, because I started to get into that electoral politic mind — that that’s where you could make change, that’s where you could have some power. I began to make those connections. I was never elected to office. I gave that up, rejected that concept in college. But in high school, being a student leader was about bringing people together, organizing, but mostly about our lives in the school, less about what was happening in the world.

I also feel that some of my politics come from my parents and my Catholic upbringing. Let me explain that because it’s complicated. I feel what I learned — Well, you know, the three tenets of Catholicism are faith, hope, and charity, and I really believed those things and in a way I still do. Also, it was about taking care of people. You know, it was certainly loving God and being a good person, but it was also very much about caring about other people. And I do feel I got that from the priests and the nuns and my family. So I got a very, very strong value that was about, you just don’t think about yourself. So a sense of family, a sense of community that was even bigger. So I’m grateful for that, because I rejected Catholicism and the church. I came back around in later years to feeling like that’s what gave me this core sense of values about people.

While I was in high school, there was a lot of disruption that played out around race and racism.

ANDERSON: And this is the late ’60s right, when you’re in high school?

ACEY: Yeah. We’re talking mid-1960s. You know, ’65 to ’68. I left in ’68 to go to college.

The Catholic girls’ school I went to was one block down the street from the public school. The public school was very racially mixed and our school wasn’t. However, we had this wonderful priest — amazing, kind, generous — he was part of the community. By then, the community was still segregated, but block by block this neighborhood I grew up in was becoming more and more integrated in terms of black folks, who had mostly lived way downtown. We had a Catholic youth organization, and Father O’Neil organized all the kids — not just the kids who went to the Catholic school — into these groups. You know, we had athletics. I was part of a choir, where we went to hospitals and nursing homes. You had fun and you did charity work. And so we started, in high school, to mix with the black folks, because in high school and grade school, most of the exposure I was given to
other races was mostly Latina or Native American, no Asian or African American, even though there were many African Americans.

So being together socially and in close proximity brought on different relationships, and there were several of us in high school who began to date African American guys, which was a big no-no, except to Father O’Neil, of course. At the same time, there was a lot of unrest in big cities still, and it got to Utica, New York. I remember I was with a guy, and I got a call from one of his friends that he’d been arrested. What would happen in Utica in those days, if you were a black guy and you were walking down the street and there were more than two of you, you were stopped. If you gave them any kind of lip, you were in jail. That was real and traumatic and unfair and all those things. So I came to this consciousness about racism just by seeing it, you know, just observing and seeing.

ANDERSON: Did you bring [the boy you were dating] home?

ACEY: No, I didn’t. It was just not accepted, which was also very painful. Prior to me getting involved with him, some friends of mine had gotten involved. You know, one of my friends was badly beaten by her father. I mean, I didn’t think my father would do that, but — Others were thrown out of the house, others were just put on complete restriction. I mean it was very intense and scary. And we were all very attached to our families. Very troublesome. So a lot of things began to get stirred up in me. I did talk to my mother and it was like, You can’t do this.

ANDERSON: You told her about the guy you were seeing?

ACEY: Yeah, and she knew him. I’m pretty transparent with — I’m not a very good liar and I’m not very good with hiding my feelings. The nuns were — I think I said earlier — a very special part of my life too, and I was very close to some of them. When a number of us were leaving for college that were in these relationships with black men, instead of bringing the guys to meet our parents, we brought them to the convent. The nuns had refreshments for us and met these fellows, and basically were like our surrogate parents. I mean, they were kind of in this conspiracy with us.

ANDERSON: Because they didn’t have any judgment about that.

ACEY: They didn’t have a judgment. I remember also, Father O’Neil was also close to my boyfriend at the time, who was putting a lot of pressure on me to have sex. And being a good Catholic girl, I was going to wait until we got married. I was just, you know, was afraid I was going to lose him, but how could I lose my virginity? So Curtis agreed, because he really liked Father O’Neil. He agreed for us to go and talk to Father O’Neil together, to see if he could help us resolve this issue of sex or no sex. Again, I remember sitting there with Father O’Neil. I don’t
remember all of the content, but I remember feeling better. I don’t think he actually gave us an answer, which is probably incredible in, like, we’re talking 1968. But I remember leaving feeling like, Well, I can make this decision, and it doesn’t have to be one way or another. We ended up having sex about six months later.

So those were really kind of expansive times for me, and troubled times because I was in conflict. The world was in conflict and I was in conflict, my friends were in conflict.

And then I went off to college. Again, to an all-girls Catholic college in Buffalo. It was a good experience. It was a small college. We were about a mile from the university [SUNY Buffalo]. So I became a student leader right away. I remember my first year at Rosary Hill — it’s called Daemen now — we had to wear skirts to dinner. The tables were set for us. This was not like a big, fancy school, but there were these standards.

So right away we got on that, and by the end of my freshman year, we were no longer having to wear skirts to dinner, nor were the tables set for us. But I got very involved. I became close friends. There were very few African American students at Rosary Hill. I and a few of the women became fast friends, and we started the group called Black Awareness on campus, and that was to bring some consciousness around race to the campus, but also to start recruiting more students, particularly from the inner city. Probably about two years later, when we did get more students, there was more recruitment, and then the black students decided that it should be just a black organization. So I had to step aside from being involved in it, but being supportive.

ANDERSON: Did you form something else, another student of color organization?

ACEY: No, there were no other — that was the one group.

In my junior and senior year, I was president of the student body, and how we took and used that was, again, not so much external. A lot of us were more politicized at that time, and what we did is really organize around not only things in the school but the war. We organized strikes and demonstrations in coalition with the other universities. I often went to meetings of all the different socialist groups and antiwar groups, sometimes on my own as just me, trying to learn as much — and sometimes representing our coalitions. We had another great chaplain, who was right there with us, demonstrating and picketing. I was still going to Mass, but less and less. He actually left the priesthood and got married years later.

So I got really in the thick of much deeper politics. I also had the benefit of having two professors who were socialists, so I started to read, you know, Marx. I was a sociology major and a philosophy minor, so I was getting the experience and the analysis. We did a lot of solidarity work and organizing in support of things that were happening in Buffalo around racist attacks. So it was kind of an inside, outside in terms of my activism in the school, and I kind of got coined as a radical.
But still, feminism was not in my consciousness as such. I think some of that may have been what I was exposed to, what I experienced first, you know, in terms of any lived experience, and some of it was maybe being around so many strong women — the nuns and other women students — in high school and college. It was a different experience in the world. In fact, I remember thinking when I was in college — I remember hearing about these women burning their bras, and I thought, That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard of. Who would burn their bra? What is the point? I wouldn’t even think of going anywhere without a bra. I was not at all connected to the women’s movement. I didn’t get it, I wasn’t exposed to it. What I did know about it was not something that resonated with me.

ANDERSON: It doesn’t sound like there was a presence on campus of any feminist groups really.

ACEY: Not that I remember, and I was fairly involved. As I said, it was around racism and it was around the war, and then just how we were treated as young women in college. It was like, We want to make up our own minds. We didn’t want to be told when we had to wear a skirt and when we could wear pants, and have to run back to your room and put on your jeans, but then when you went to class or to dinner you had to put on your skirt. So we were resisting, at that point, this authority putting on us these rules. So I suppose you could call that feminism, but that’s not what we called it.

I remember Buffalo used to get harsh winters and icy. I remember one day when we called a strike. Buffalo was in the suburbs and, you know, a lot of us lived on campus. I moved off campus my second year, or maybe it was my third year, but I definitely moved off campus. My sister was there now behind me. She was a year behind me, and she was an art major. I remember standing at the driveway, out in the streets just stopping cars. They were sliding all over the place.

And by that time, I was wearing my hair in an Afro, because all those years I’d been straightening my hair — going to bed with those big rollers, brushing out my hair and putting these caps on. So that was very liberating when I got to college and I was like — washed my hair one day and I just let it go wild, and I was like, I think I like this. You know, it was definitely influenced by the black power movement and black is beautiful. I wasn’t black, but it was, like, I had this really curly, frizzy hair, and so that’s when I started wearing my — I mean, I used to wear very big, bushy Afros. I wanted to be Angela Davis in those days. Who didn’t?

ANDERSON: Any lesbian inklings or community or relationships on that campus that you were aware of? Where did that come in?

ACEY: Yes. Well, you know, if you hadn’t asked me that question —
So in my first year in college I had a roommate. Very different, very tall, white, blondish girl from a very affluent family in Maine, but we got along. And then there was this other person on campus. She was kind of like one of those, What is she about? I was radical but she was like, Screw the system, screw authority. She was like, I can do anything I want: drink hard, play hard. Basically, fuck authority, if you will, so.

And she and my roommate became very good friends, and they started hanging out a lot together. Over time, my roommate would be missing in action, then it was clear they were also doing some drugs, but that they were also in a relationship. I loved them both, and I would hang out with them sometimes or just try to see where was my —

They were having this relationship, but they were getting really strung out. There came one period where my friend’s father showed up, and I was called to the Student Affairs Office by the vice president of the college, and they wanted to know where she was. And I knew where she was. I said, “Well, you know, I will try to find her, but I can’t talk to you about this.” So I went and looked for her and I found that they were together, and she was really strung out on drugs. And by this time, the other woman was really scared. I said, “We’ve got — Her father’s here, she’s got to get help.” I know she was trying to reject her family too, and they didn’t get her at all, but it was, like, she was really sick.

So they took her away, and she came back eventually, and they were supposedly not allowed to see each other, but they did, and they ended up running away together eventually. We stayed in contact for a while and then we just kind of — even when I was gone from college, and then we kind of drifted. I often think about them. Not often, but every once in a while I’m like, Where are they and what happened to them?

So that was my first introduction, and I didn’t think it was unusual. Then — I forget what year it was, we were probably juniors in college by then — but through this certain VA [United States Department of Veterans Affairs] policy, they started to have more men. Not a lot, but more men coming in through this — guys coming back from Vietnam. So all of a sudden there were more men on campus from the community but from — They kind of swaggered and most of us didn’t pay attention to them. A couple of them ended up dating some of the women, but we weren’t that happy with it, but it was like, Eh, no big deal, until they tried to take over the student politics, and then we said, No way. There were some of them — not all of them, because they had already been a few there, like in theater arts and in some sciences, and they were like, you know, nice guys pretty much, not that visible.

So we had some tensions there for a while. And then some of the guys started asking some of my crowd out, and we said we didn’t want to go out with them. So then it became a rumor on campus — There was this really good friend of mine, and we’re still very close, Debra. She was from the community in Buffalo, was still there after
(inaudible). So we started to be called bulldaggers, and of course I had no idea what bulldagger meant. It didn’t sound very good. So then — I forget how we found out what bulldagger meant — and we would laugh. We just thought wasn’t it the funniest thing you ever heard of, and so we kind of played with it. We’d lock arms when this one guy would go by and just kind of play with him.

And then another thing that I forgot, again, until much later. I guess my memory is not so great. I, with some of the other student leaders — because we would bring different people on the campus to talk on different political issues. We a group of the Matachines on campus. I remember sitting in the student union. We had, like, this one room that was kind of like a big living room, having this discussion and again it was like, huh?

ANDERSON: It’s still not clicking for you.

ACEY: It’s not clicking for me at all. Mind you, I’ve had crushes on the nuns, I’ve gravitated towards some of these older girls in high school and college. I’d been followed around by younger girls. So it was all of this.

I had a very close friend who went away to college before I did. She was a year ahead of me. We wrote to each other every day, and when I look back at those letters — I saved a lot of them — they’re like love letters. But it was a very emotional — never felt, like, sexual. Sometimes physical in an affectionate way — you know, very cuddly — but it never even dawned on me. Sex with a woman never even — it was like, Absolutely not.

ANDERSON: Were you still dating Curtis at this point?

ACEY: Oh Curtis, no. Curtis — he really did me in, that Curtis, I’ll tell you. I’ve never had good luck with men — or with women either for that matter. (laughs) Actually, that’s why I’ve got to stay involved in politics. Curtis and I, um — I went off to college and we were together that first year, back and forth. I think we broke up in my sophomore year. He was a year behind me, the same age but a year behind me. So he started college but he stayed in Utica. In Utica, there was, like — A lot of New Yorkers came to go to college at Utica College in Mohawk Valley, and by then he’d become very involved in the black power movement, which meant — for him, it translated to only being with black people. And then he really liked to have sex, and so here he was, he had a new girlfriend.

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk a little bit more about the enormous rupture that happens in your life after your sister’s attack, because it seems so central to — What year were you in college when that happened?
I’m trying to think. I think that I was a senior and she was a junior. I think I mentioned, my sister and I have lived in the same city, in very close proximity, for all of our lives, except for about two years when she was in graduate school out in Texas and Arizona.

Rosary Hill was, as I said, in the suburbs, and there was no transportation. The buses ran, but they stopped at a certain hour. Buses didn’t even run, I don’t think, on the weekends. So the college culture in Buffalo — not just at Rosary Hill, and probably in the United States, I would imagine — was you hitchhiked. I remember hitchhiking from Buffalo to Albany to go see somebody. You know, we were hitchhiking together. My first years, before I moved off campus, I had a job off campus, and I would hitchhike to that job, and once a guy exposed himself. I used to carry a knife actually, but I don’t know what I thought I was going to do with it.

I forgot about that too. God, you know, the things that come back to you are amazing. So it was a culture of hitchhiking, and people were careful. I eventually stopped hitchhiking by myself. I didn’t think it was such a cool, you know — But sometimes you just got desperate though, you had to get someplace. Nobody had the money to have cabs, and it wasn’t like New York where you just, you know, put your hand out.

My sister and her roommate were going out for the evening to a bar, and they left campus and they hitchhiked. They got picked up by two guys, who drove them near where they were going, but pulled into the driveway at the state hospital, which is this big — massive acres and trees and deserted and dark — you know, long driveway. My sister and her roommate were in the back seat of a two-door car, and when they went to let them out, her roommate got out, they pushed her, and they drove off. Her roommate got hysterical and called the police when she got somewhere — I can’t remember — and got some help.

I worked my way through college. I mean, I had some scholarships and my parents helped me, but I always held down a job. I don’t know how I did that. I used to take a lot of classes, be involved in politics, and work. I just don’t know how that all happened but it did. I was probably a crazy person then too.

I was running the student union that night and there was a dance. I got a call to come to the police station. I was with these close women friends, and I didn’t have a jacket, it was chilly. My friend gave me her leather jacket and said, “Wear this.” And I went off, and I got to the police station and found out what had happened to my sister. She’d been beaten and raped. She’d been found in a park. There was an alert out, that she was in a park that was closed, with these guys, and the police were just doing a routine run-by of the park, and they saw this car and they investigated.

So my sister was traumatized. There was a woman police officer talking to her and then to me. The guys who had done this were African American, and the police were saying some really outrageous — So it was this, really, another one of those conflict-ridden,
contradictory situations where both she, who is, like, bruised and beaten — She was a virgin. She might have been a sophomore or a freshman. I don’t know, (inaudible) personal history, anyway. So we got into an argument with the police officer, who had begun to make some racist statements, and I made the comment that, “How can you say this? I was with friends, this jacket belongs to my friend.” So I just said to them, “Let’s just leave this, let’s just get out,” because she had to get to the hospital, get all these tests. We’re talking late ’60s, maybe 1970s.

I can’t remember if I was of legal age, because I am a year older, but we basically didn’t want my parents to know what happened to my sister, because we felt it would kill them, knowing that she’d been raped and brutally beaten. To this day we don’t know. There were all kinds of knives and axes in the car, so we don’t know if they intended to kill —

ANDERSON: So you were trying to protect your parents from the pain of that.

ACEY: We were trying to protect my parents, which was, you know, probably the very wrong thing to do. And then within days, my mother and my aunt were coming to visit, and now this became a big thing. There was a big newspaper article that someone had been raped from campus. Nobody knew, so there was all this buzz on the campus. My sister is not in a great shape, we’re trying to keep this from our parents. My aunt and mother arrive, and we go out and do something and we come back to my sister’s room, and she’s on the phone sobbing. What the police had done is to call my father and told him that his daughter was brutally beaten and raped, and his other daughter — they made up some kind of story, and I can’t remember. Again, I’d have to ask my sister exactly how it went, but they got in that his other daughter — they got in the leather jacket and all that, but they kind of made it something else.

So then here we are, my mother and Anna want to know what’s happened and why was my sister crying. So that was like completely — And Joanne, well, she had to go through three trials. She already had left Buffalo and gone off to graduate school, and they were flying her back. I think the first trial was a hung jury, and the second trial they were convicted, but then they got off on a technicality, an appeal. And then there was a third trial, at which they were, in fact, convicted. One, I think, ended up serving a few months, the other a year. So, ah, it was, you know, a big thing. I think I went through a lot of denial, you know?

A number of years later, I began to be more in touch with the feelings about it. Now I — you know, fast forward — I have become involved in the women’s movement, through reproductive rights and sterilization abuse work, and then anti-sterilization abuse, and also antiviolence, women’s antiviolence work, mostly around sexual assault and rape, but also somewhat around battered women. They were different organizations at that time, but the women who were doing the antiviolence work were very connected. Some are involved in both. So
it was years later that I got more connected to what had happened, because I think I went into a very — denial: [it] happened, [it’s] over. You know, I felt like my sister needed to get some help. Initially she did a little counseling, but she really never, I don’t feel — The resources weren’t there. She was treated terribly by the defense attorneys, treated terribly by the medical folks. There was no one place that I feel she got what she needed, and I think even from me. My parents were devastated, but again, there wasn’t a lot of discussion about it. So years later I got more in touch with what had happened, kind of the hugeness of it.

ANDERSON: Through the movement or through other personal work or therapy?

ACEY: In working within the women’s antiviolence movement. By the time I got involved with it, there were many lesbians, women of color. It was about organizing and advocacy but also services, but it was also about personal. So the more exposed I got to people working, but also women who had experienced some violence, the closer it got me to, like, begin to get better in touch and to begin to take in that experience in a whole different way.

I remember distinctly one conference where there was a session that was women of color only, to talk personally. The opening question was, We’re going to go around the room, and I want each person to — if they can — relate an experience of their own or of someone close to them or one they know. I remember there might have been about 40 women in the room. Every single woman had a story, and I was totally overwhelmed by it. Again, this is years later. We’re maybe talking at least ten years later, if not more — probably more — since my sister’s rape. I just remember just sobbing and sobbing, and then I started to talk a little more to my sister. Well, now we’re talking, you know, well over 30 years ago. It still feels like it didn’t get completely processed, if you will, so.

ANDERSON: Do you think that your politics are rooted in that experience in some ways, the direction that you went with antiviolence work?

ACEY: I don’t think so. Not consciously. I came to New York in ’74 to go to graduate school, and thought I’d come for a couple of years, get New York out of my system, get my degree, and go back to Buffalo. When I graduated from college I had connections, so I got a job as a waitress in a museum for the first six months.

ANDERSON: Up in Buffalo, you stayed there?

ACEY: Yeah. And then I got a real — not a real job, but I got a job that was more in line with what I wanted to do, which was setting up a program with six other people within this bigger agency around crisis
We became a mobile unit in Buffalo. It was a very exciting job. At that time I thought I’d go to law school, but I wanted to work first. People kept encouraging me to go back to school, because at one point in this program, the first person who had been hired as the director was leaving and recommended that I become the director, and I was younger than most of them. The head of the agency said, you know, I didn’t have a master’s degree. My colleagues who were older and had master’s degrees said, You know, you really need to go back to school, because if you’re going to do this work, they’re going to want you to have it. So at that time I thought, Okay, I’ll go back to school and get the master’s in social work and the law degree. There were different schools then, offering the joint degrees. So I started to apply and then I just was like, I’m not going to school for four years. So instead of going to law school, I said, “Well, first I’ll go to social work school and then I’ll go back to law school.” Well, that never happened.

So I came to New York in ’74 and went to Columbia. Again, I was fortunate to have professors like George Brager and Richard Cloward. And then I got exposed to all these other folks, political activists. I became president of the student body again. (laughs) I was a sucker for that stuff. I was like, Okay, let’s get organized.

ANDERSON: What was the climate like on campus in the ’70s?

ACEY: In ’74 it was, like, after the dawn of all that radicalism that was rampant at Columbia, so you had people like Cloward. Francis Fox Piven wasn’t in the social work school but she was around and, you know. So you had a lot of the community organizers, you had a lot of the socialists. In fact, I majored in community organizing and planning, and my class — those of us that went in in ’70 — we were the last ones that could major in that at Columbia. So they are already — I mean, it was all at Columbia University, but it was in the school of — they’re already moving in another direction.

But I really think coming to New York and becoming friends with different people that I went to school with then exposed me to the women’s movement. So it was in New York that I really came into feminism. At first I got involved in CARASA [Coalition for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse], and then I got involved with New York Women Against Rape.

You know, besides the student politics, there was a group of us that started a journal called Catalyst: A Socialist Journal of the Social Services. And I think we changed it to the Human Services. So that was one piece of work. I did a lot of other pieces of organizing, kind of in and out — Farm workers. Later on — I was already out of school — but anti-apartheid. I kind of was touching down in different places. Kind of Catalyst was an anchor of doing some work. I did a lot of different study groups — feminist study groups, political economy. I
loved the study group thing because you kind of, like, read and talk to people, sharpen –

ANDERSON: Did you do more study groups than c.r. [consciousness-raising] groups?

ACEY: There were more study groups than c.r. groups, but I did some c.r. groups with different groupings of people. It kind of was more of a blend, and that pretty much — you know, into the ’70s and right into the ’80s, quite a bit of that.

Some of my groups were really small, not the political economy. One group — there was five of us, and we worked with a mentor to really read all of Marx. Another group was a feminist. We looked at the movement, we read articles, books, had discussions, potlucks. Another group was more like a feminist support group, and was the political kind. So there was always at least one going on, if not two, for a number of years, and they kind of stretched out.

Then I got very involved in New York Women Against Rape. By the late ’70s is when I started to come out. So I got involved in feminist organizations. So while I’d been with women in high school and college, I always had a boyfriend. I was always political. I never thought of anything about heterosexuality, even though I was accepting, I never thought for myself. So I think that the combination — it was kind of like an evolution of getting involved with feminist politics from a different way.

Even when I remember being in the *Catalyst* collective, there were strong women in it, but very strong and talkative men, and smart. I remember a couple of meetings where some of the women were saying, There’s sexism going on here. And I would be like, What are you talking about? What are you talking about? And they were, like, so pissed at me and, you know, I was — I didn’t see it. But through them talking to me and thinking about it more, and then I began to experience it. I think that’s the moment when I began to think back, you know, to that eighth grade experience. But then, all the different places. You know, the men coming onto the college campus and like, Okay, we’re here, don’t worry. You know, all those things, I began to be able to kind of piece it together.
TAPE 3

ANDERSON: What was the racial makeup of your c.r. and study groups? Were you gravitating towards women of color?

ACEY: There were different phases. So in the beginning, like when we started Catalyst, it was predominantly white. I would say that some of my political and c.r. groups were predominantly white, and then as time went on, it became more racially mixed, and then eventually I was in women of color groups. So there was a whole evolution for me at that point. And I think in kind of the late ’70s, early ’80s, I went through huge evolution of identity, both in terms of race and sexuality.

ANDERSON: Okay, say more about that, and then we’ll go to CARASA [Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse].

ACEY: As I’ve come to think of it, in graduate school — let me try to kind of talk about the race identity. We’ve talked earlier, where I knew I was different, but it came up in a period where you were black or white. That’s not to say other people of color weren’t really clear about they were people of color, but I’m talking about my own personal experience and how I’ve come to understand it, and even what I experienced in the moment, which was a lot of conflict and confusion. But I also had the privilege, younger, where it was like, you know, you could pick. So I’m very aware of all those dynamics too.

In the ’70s, you know, being at Columbia and after, and coming in contact with lots of more different people. Coming to New York opened up a whole world of exposure more politically, but exposure to other people, other races, sexualities. Growing up it was very much white and black, in college it was white and black. Coming to New York, it was everybody. The dynamics of white and black in the United States was still there, and I think still is today, but we had this concept and this language around people of color, and it’s very different. We could go on hours about that.

But for me personally in college, there was a black caucus and a Latina caucus, and this happened to me repeatedly throughout my experiences. The Latinas would always come to me and say, Why weren’t you at the meeting? So it was this assumption that I was something that I wasn’t. But no one ever saw — Once in my entire life did someone come up to me and say, “Are you Arab? Are you Lebanese?” It was a Native American man doing a workshop that I was in at a conference.

I began to get exposed to different people and actually, I knew one Jewish family growing up because my aunt worked for them and was very good friends with this family. He was a Holocaust survivor. So that’s what I knew about Jewish people, besides driving by the synagogues. When I got to college, an all-girls Catholic college, there
was one Jewish woman from New York. And then I came to New
York. I was at graduate school and I was in school with all kinds of
people. Immigrants, black people, Latinas — my first broad exposure
to Latinas. In fact, one of my closest friends, Elma, we met in graduate
school. She was a year behind me. We’re the closest of friends to this
day. She’s still in New York and we’re actually going to the beach
tomorrow. And so this whole — Jewish friends? Wow! So this whole
other world just became — That’s one of the reasons I don’t think I
could leave when it was time for me to go back to Buffalo.

So then I got involved — again, through friends in graduate
school who were feminists and involved in the women’s movement. I
went to CARASA meetings. I got involved with the New York Women
Against Rape. I was still doing Catalyst and some other things and, of
course, doing radical things within the area of social work. We formed
different groups here and there.

CARASA and New York Women Against Rape really got me
more exposed to becoming friends with lesbians. Through other
friends, I became friends with this couple, who were — they were just
in New York recently — and one of them became like my confidant. I
began to experience feelings towards women that weren’t just, you
know, nice and cuddly. I remember I was doing a group summer house
with a bunch of friends, and somebody that somebody knew was also
sharing the house, who we had met. I remember halfway through the
summer, I woke up and all I could think about was this woman’s
breasts. I was terrified, like, What the hell is going on?

And then I was introduced to women’s music. You know, Chris
Williamson and Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert, and I was like, Wow,
hmm. For me, I was like, soul music and jazz. I wasn’t one of those
’60s kids that was into rock and roll. It was into soul music and jazz —

ANDERSON: Well, did you like the women’s music?

ACEY: Well, I did in the beginning, because I was coming out, I didn’t know it.
So it was like, you know, Holly Near, “Imagine My Surprise!” Then
Diana Ross, “I’m Coming Out,” you know, I was lip syncing all the
time. So there was CARASA and New York Women Against Rape,
and then I developed a crush on somebody, and I finally was able to,
kind of, after months and months of discussions with my friend, who
was like, If you don’t do this I’m going to kill myself. It’s like, I’m
going to ask her. So we were off and running. I kind of came out and
was going through that process in the late ’70s but by ’80 I was out, but
it was out in a very personal way, it wasn’t political.

And so then, being in CARASA and New York Women Against
Rape, and then that was my coming out relationship. But then at the
time, I was very involved with New York Women Against Rape, and so
was the woman who I eventually ended up with for a number of years,
Stephanie Roth, who was the co-director with Sandra Camacho
eventually. Sandra died a number of years back, in her forties, of
ovarian cancer. You know, involved and met many friends. If I start to mention people, I’m going to leave them out, but so many people that are, like, part of my life today.

Within CARASA, within New York Women Against Rape, there was a very strong lesbian presence, a very radical presence. There was a very strong women of color presence, even more so in New York Women Against Rape than CARASA. It was a time when there was a lot of struggle internally in the women’s movement, but particularly in grassroots women’s groups that were mixed racially and sexually, because the women of color and the lesbians were coming into their own in terms of articulating this, of how to make these organizations more responsive and driven by those things.

So then there were caucuses, and that’s where I began to develop a feminist analysis and identity, and in a very — you know, much more articulate. I think in some ways I was probably always a feminist and maybe a lesbian. I could see where it was both the combination of exposure and openness and being able to just be more expansive, that I began to see those things as options, and to be able to act on them. So that’s why I always say I came to my feminism late. Really, it came out of more of racial and class identity and experience, and had that analysis.

I was very fortunate to be grounded in some theory when I went to college, you know, even in a Catholic girls’ college. But it was a big struggle then, because here I was, I was dealing with sexual identity, racial politics and identity, and also kind of just figuring out that transition. In a way, I was coming into my own, but I didn’t belong anywhere. It was being in that place of confusion and just a lot of turmoil.

And then, I also, you know, in this whole period — late ’70s, into the early ’80s — a lot of turmoil in my life: political, personal. I bought this house with a friend. I could barely do it. If she hadn’t pushed, I wouldn’t be here and be in the position I’m in. My mother died suddenly. I was in my first long-term women’s relationship. So it was like, Boom! And then I was starting a new job at the North Star Fund. It’s kind of when I got into philanthropy, in ’82. My mother died in ’83. I came out essentially in ’80.

ANDERSON: Did you come out to your family?

ACEY: No. I came out to my sister, and I kind of came out to my mother. I mean, she knew we were going to have a discussion. Because it was very personal at first, it wasn’t political. I needed to kind of move through that. So she knew. I knew that she knew, and I think she knew that I knew that she knew, but we talked around it. We had set a time that she and I were going to just spend some days together, because a lot of times my sister and I would go up there and there would be a lot of family stuff. And we were going to have some time. I said, “Mom, I
really want to spend some time with you.” We were going to do that in June, and she died in May.

ANDERSON: I’m sorry. What did she die from?

ACEY: She went into the hospital to have a gallbladder operation, and they screwed up basically.

ANDERSON: Wow. That must have turned your world upside down.

ACEY: I was pretty turned upside down. My father, my sister, my aunts, my uncles. I just felt like my heart had been ripped out, that life would never be the same again. I didn’t even know if I could survive. And I think, you know, my father having the heart attack a month later, and the doctors telling us that he may die, and then telling us, Well, he’s going to come through this but don’t expect him to live much longer than a couple of years. He’s very, very damaged.

So it took me a very long time to move through my mother. I mean, I think in some ways I’m still doing it, but I mean, I’m talking at least ten years for me to kind of come through it in a way that I felt like it wasn’t sitting there every moment. (inaudible) For my father and my sister too. Really, my mother was the — I loved people, I was loved, I am loved. I’m very aware of it, I’m very grateful. And my mother — there was something — you know, her mother and then her. I think they were the people, somehow, that I felt got me.

ANDERSON: Go ahead.

ACEY: So I’m going through this whole, like, evolution: internal, external. I’m very active. Once I came out, I knew there was no turning back, and I was like, This is it. But it took me some time to put it together politically, like, how that fit into my political — I mean, it wasn’t hard or anything. People are people and any injustice is wrong, but to really have an analysis and a deeper understanding that I could take from the personal and really integrate into my analysis and my work and how I moved in the world.

ANDERSON: And what tools helped you to do that?

ACEY: Well, when I was coming out, I read every single novel or book that was out there. I mean, I was like a sponge. I love to read anyway, and I am a pretty quick reader. Even when my life is completely turned upside down, I still read. Sometimes I get away from it, but mostly it’s one of the things that I’ve always loved to do. And so there was the reading.

I was very fortunate to be in the different study groups, but also CARASA and New York Women Against Rape. There were many meetings, there were lesbian caucuses, women of color caucuses, and that’s where I really was able to come to an understanding around my
own racial identity and racial politics that were not framed only in black and white. It also moved me eventually to have more discussions within my family, because, you know, some of my family identified as people of — Everybody identifies with whatever they are — ethnicity — but some see themselves as people of color and some don’t. But I began to be able to enter discussions with my family in a different way. Even my dad, you know, I’d say, “Talk to me about being Lebanese. When you grew up, how did that feel, you know?” He was often mistaken as Italian in his era.

I began to be able to have more discussions and to get this kind of — out of myself and my own internal turmoil — to try to figure it out. I think in that period — coming out, coming into feminist politics, understanding racial identity in a different way, with clarity — that was all informed by the groups I was in and the people I was talking with and meeting. Although the internal evolution around it for me was still very personal, but now it was tied to something that made sense, more sense.

I think of everything. It was all exhilarating and just kind of liberating, but particularly the racial politics and identity was very, very painful. I recall in the early ’80s, I had already started North Star. I had been asked in an interview, like, how I identified racially, and I was really taken aback. I kind of froze up, and then I said, “Well, white.” So I was still working on this white/black, and now I have to choose. Well, I knew I wasn’t black, but I knew that more strongly than I knew I wasn’t white. I felt like, I’ve got to give an answer. And I had been living my life, you know, like, in this confused state but also, when push came to shove, I was white.

So while I felt excited about my feminist politics, I was like, Well, hey, what took you so long? Same with the lesbian stuff, but I didn’t feel like I had deep shame. I felt some shame and embarrassment — well, look how long it took me — but I was also very proud of what I am. I’d been an activist, I’d been very political, so I had a better understanding of how that built and opened up for me. The racial stuff I felt a lot of shame about, that I came to that clarity much later, and it caused a lot of conflict with some relationships.

ANDERSON: How so?

ACEY: Political relationships. Once I was able to work this out and I understood this concept of people of color and that Arab people fell into that, and that there were other people trying to figure (inaudible).

It was funny because constantly — as I said earlier — there was this assumption that I was a Latina. Now, when I got into the women’s movement, into these grassroots community groups, there weren’t just black caucuses and Latina caucuses, there were people of color caucuses. It was constantly like, you know, Are you coming to the meeting? Or, Where were you at the meeting? So I started going to these women of color or lesbian of color caucuses, and I was very
welcomed, and often the only Arab. But then I began to feel, Well, do they think I’m Latina? And then I began to talk about this stuff in these groups and got a lot of support and understanding, but here in this other life over here, working at the North Star Fund, I had put myself white, even though they were like, What is she talking about?

So as I began to feel, like, more anchored and have a deeper understanding and be able to talk about this a little more in what I felt were safer places with other women of color and sometimes straights. I began to, like, Okay, this is where I belong, this is who I am. Now I have a frame for it in a different way. So then it was about, different people are going to assume I’m white, I’m Latina, I’m this and that, and now I have to take this on for me, that I’ve lived with this anxiety and this conflict all this time. But there wasn’t consensus in my family, there wasn’t consensus in political groups, then there was this whole progressive philanthropy.

I’ll never forget — I was at a conference — the day I walked into a people of color caucus for the first time with colleagues who I was not necessarily having these discussions with. And two of them were just furious with me, extremely furious, which I understood later. I hadn’t engaged with them and I just showed up. So we had to have long talks.

ANDERSON: Why were they furious?

ACEY: Because they felt that I had taken on this identity of a white person and that I had named it myself, you know, going back to that interview, and then all of a sudden, here I am. And they weren’t aware of all these other places that I was in dialogue, in action, being a part of. So that took time to talk through and for them to be less angry, and I think eventually not angry and understand — for me to understand how they might feel and to, you know, not be arrogant, and at the same time, I’m trying to stake my ground and be where I felt I needed to be and what I really felt inside of me. And to know that there was, you know, that I had skin privilege and all other kinds of ways of passing, even though in a lot of settings, I don’t pass at all. But I was also so very alone, because in the women’s movement and in the queer movement, there were not a lot of Arab lesbians. So I was often in lesbian of color or women of color spaces, but often, then, the only one there. And that began to change and has totally evolved in the last ten years, like from the ’90s. Totally. We’re still a minority, but it’s still much more visible.

So here I am this radical, and now I’ve got the feminism and the lesbian, and so for me — It’s like we use this word today, *intersectionality*, but it’s like, I feel like myself as a person and politically came together fully in the early ’80s, and I’ve never looked back in terms of how all of that gets integrated not just to me as a person but into my politics, no matter what I’m doing, where I am, what the issue is, what the group is.
It’s very satisfying but also filled with a lot of — still — pain and questions. And what I mean by that is, because I feel like, even in 2007, we still have to struggle for this really integrated — the integrated person and the integrated politics. It’s like, you’ve got to be either this or that if you’re going to fight for this issue. It’s like, how do you take — we’re all, I think, still learning how to take the lived experience and the political analysis, whatever you lead with, whatever, and to put it together.

Working at Astraea for the past 20 years, I’m totally supportive of lesbians, queer women, trans people. It is part of my life, my politics, who I am. Astraea is a place where that’s the constituency we work from, but what’s allowed me to be — I think one of the many things it’s allowed me, but I think the most important thing that’s allowed me to stay at Astraea so long, is that Astraea has been a place, an institution with founding mothers, and everyone who’s come through — where the highest value is to have this overarching social, racial, economic justice frame, the intersectionality, and to try to work with it — work it, be it. It’s not easy, but that’s been, I think, the anchor, because I think I could have gone to a women’s organization or an Arab organization or a housing organization. That would have been still something to take and honor, but Astraea has really — is grounded in that.

It’s interesting, because I think from the outside, sometimes people see it as narrow, because if you say lesbian, you say queer, it’s like, Well, okay, you have a narrow focus, rather than, This is the community you focus with, but your frame, your politics, how you integrate them, how you practice them, is so much bigger than any one group of people.

ANDERSON: We have a lot to talk about with Astraea, but I just want to back up a little bit. Out of that feeling of isolation within women of color groups, did you then start to seek out Arab women? Were there Arab women’s organizations at that time? How did you find that kind of a community?

ACEY: I don’t know if I found them or they found me. A few things happened. Now we’re moving more towards the later ’80s. I’m grounded in the women’s community, in women of color, lesbian of color friendships and political associations and groups. I think I’m providing some leadership in those areas, with those groups. I had always been involved, at least in thinking if not in practice, with international issues, and had been involved with particularly Central America. I’ve been part of the board of MADRE and traveled, started to travel internationally in the mid to late ’80s. And then I got involved in Palestinian human rights, and I was very involved in the Palestine Solidarity Committee, and eventually got elected to the national executive committee as an out lesbian. That was terrifying. So that kind of brought me to another place. I’m not Palestinian, but there were many Arabs, as well as others, involved in this work. So I began to get exposed, rather than from my
family and church, now to a political community that identified as Arab, and all the different ethnicities in that.

ANDERSON: Was that a hard place to be as a lesbian?

ACEY: It was scary. My closest political friends — Palestinians and others — but two of the leaders of the group knew and it was never a question. When I ran for this election, I knew I needed to do it as an out lesbian. I was scared. In fact, I remember sitting in the audience — because it was secret ballot — and there was a delay in the balloting, so I thought for sure that this was about me. Of course, how could it not be about me? I remember perspiration on my lip, and just that anxiety and that, like, where your heart stops and like, They’re just going to tell me. And it was, like, totally not about me. I don’t even remember.

Was there homophobia? Well, yeah. But was I respected and supported? Yeah. But like many other progressive or left groups, even ones that have a lot of queers in them, I think, still today in 2007 — and I actually said this in a meeting of colleagues recently, a small group, a mix of national leaders. I said, you know, I felt a lot of personal support, and people feel support, straight or queer support, but they don’t get it in that very visceral gut. So if you don’t get it in your gut, when you talk about it and you try to incorporate in your analysis, it doesn’t always kind of work, and that I really felt for progressives, heterosexuals, they really needed to take a good look at that. And I, for one, would be supportive, but that I still felt that I’m often, even in very politically conscious organizations — whether it’s philanthropy or other groups that are not queer — that I still often, I see where others often have to raise the issue around sexuality and gender expression and identity. It just gets left out of the language or people assume, Well, it’s there, but we’re still in an era where you have to say it.

ANDERSON: And don’t you feel the same way about the Arab stuff too in terms of people of color caucuses and organizations?

ACEY: Yeah, and even in the women’s movement. The women’s movement — And I’ve been part of a group where we held the first, what we believed to be one of the first — there’d been other Palestinian women’s organizations — but the first national gathering of Arab and Arab American women who identify either indirectly or directly as feminists. We worked for three years to bring something together in Chicago.

ANDERSON: When was that?

ACEY: A year ago June, and we were all volunteers. And even in the new women’s movement, we’re very aware that there were two — and then just me — Arab women. And some of that’s about, where are Arab women in the U.S., and where is that movement within the women’s movement, or separately? Some of it is about where Arab women are
organizing and putting their political — and where their voices are and how they have been stifled, either by our communities in some way and/or by the women’s movement. I think, in a very ironic way, immigration, as well as 9/11, has kind of raised the consciousness — not obviously in a good way necessarily — of Arab Americans. So that’s a story that needs to keep unraveling, and I think we will see, some time in the next five years, a more visible organized presence of Arab and Arab American women.

ANDERSON: What happened at that conference last year?

ACEY: I think there was great enthusiasm. It was very intergenerational, very multiethnic within the Arab communities, very global in perspective, even though we were very clear that this was only for Arab and Arab Americans in the United States. I mean, if somebody came — but we weren’t outreaching all over the world. It was a small gathering, probably about 150 people, but it was the beginning of something different. There are a lot of different listservs — both Arab and lesbian networks, Arab feminists, academics — but there’s not a physical ongoing interaction or organizing that’s easily identifiable. So what happened there was, I think, a spark was set. I think people felt, Oh my God, I’ve never been in something like this; I feel like I have come home. You know, that feeling of coming home, when all the pieces of you begin to come together.

ANDERSON: Did you feel that way?

ACEY: Yeah, I did, I did. I did very much. It’s hard for me because I’m so overextended and overwhelmed. I would love to put my energies there but I can’t right now, and so I’ve needed to step back from that. You know, just prior to the last push of that gathering, my father died. My father died in April, this gathering was in June. I was kind of shell shocked, and so I experienced deep feelings and deep connection but I was still a little numb.

ANDERSON: Do you see something like a formal organization or something like that growing out of it, or do you think it will be a loose network? What do you think the vision is for it?

ACEY: Well, I think the vision is all over the place. I think, mentally, many of us see some kind of loose network, and there is a very loose, loose network. And for others of us, we felt, you know, some day it would be great if there could be an organization. There seems to be a need for one. What we see is that Arab women need to form an identity together, not around identity politics, because even this gathering was very — you know, a lot of stuff around sexuality, trans people.

I was so proud of my sisters, I have to tell you, because of some of the ways we organized around this. We had starts and stops, we were
all volunteers, we were all over the country. The genesis of trying to do this grew out of an insight conference that many of us were at. We had many retreats, you know, with our vision planning. We had a big, big vision; we had to narrow it down. First we were imagining 500 people. It took us almost three years to get from when we first started to talk about it, plan together. We were a group of lesbians and heterosexual women. We were all feminist. So we had some grounding with each — Many of us knew each other, but there were people who didn’t know each other. There was always somebody [who] somebody didn’t know. So we had a lot of relationship already, we had some commonalities, but we also had some tensions.

One of the approaches we took is that we went to different communities to talk, where there were more organized Arab women. I remember being in one community in the Midwest, and all these Arab women had come, anywhere from their early twenties into their sixties and seventies. We were talking about what we were trying to do, we wanted to be in dialogue, respect that they had been working in their communities. It might have been social services or the Arab Cultural Center or Palestine Human Rights, and what were we about and why did we want this gathering. We were developing a vision statement that was very feminist, very out there about sexuality, who was in the group, and who was doing this.

But we had to come out again, and it sparked a lot of discussion, and some people ended up not coming to the gathering, but we got much more support. Then we also decided that we had to have a trans policy, and then we had to explain in all our literature what we meant by trans and transgender, and why there will be, you know, gender neutral bathrooms. I mean, it’s like, with all of that, we still brought in some of the older people. So I was very proud. We have a program book that —

So my hope is that, over the next months and years, something will evolve into an organization, a dynamic organization. I really feel that Arab women are not integrated into the women’s movement. I think there are certain women of color groups that are welcoming, but that it’s an invisible population. Some of that has to do with our own dynamics and where we are as a community and all of its diversity, but unless we can develop a place, a core. How should I say it? A power base, of which, then, to be part of but also pushing against, not just the women’s movement, but even in our communities.

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk about North Star? Was that a pivotal experience for you in terms of getting into your work with Astraea?

ACEY: I’m celebrating 25 years in progressive feminist public foundation philanthropy. I never thought I would be at Astraea this long, or that I would spend 25 years in the field of philanthropy per se. I kind of came to philanthropy and this work through the back door. I was transitioning from one job, and Michael Seltzer, who is a very good friend — a gay man who thinks of himself as a lesbian — has been involved himself for
many more years than I in progressive philanthropy. He’d been part of
the People’s Community Foundation in Philadelphia, one of the oldest
public foundations within the Funding Exchange. That’s not their name
anymore. He and I were in the same offices. He was a consultant. I
was working at another nonprofit at the time and beginning to look for a
job, and he said, “You should check out this North Star thing.” And I
was like, Yeah, yeah. So I applied. What attracted me to North Star
was, I didn’t think about it as, Oh, it’s a foundation. I thought, Oh, they
work with all these grassroots political groups in New York City. And I
didn’t even know then about the national structure. So it became very
appealing. It was like, Wow!

ANDERSON: Were you on the board of Astraea from the beginning, or no?

ACEY: No, no, I was not there from the beginning. They started talking about
Astraea and having meetings in the late ’70s. I think ’77, ’78 is when
they actually said, Okay, this is the Astraea Foundation, made their first
grants — we go by fiscal years — I think ’77/’78.

Through a number of things, which we can talk about, Astraea
decided it needed to grow, and part of growing would be to hire staff. I
became interested in the concept of being the director, and then there
were some board members who, knowing that I had been at North Star,
they were like, What about you? So I took a leave of absence from
Astraea during this process to think about whether I was going to apply,
and then once I applied, to get off the board.

It was a big decision, because I really — I was very into my job
at North Star. We were part of a national network. It introduced me to
progressive philanthropy, not just the Funding Exchange, and not just
the fundraising. I began to learn more and more about the various
movements in New York City and the country. I’d known about it, but
it wasn’t — Like the labor movement. There was a lot of organizing
also in Asian American communities around any number of issues.
Housing. I knew about the housing because, actually, when I came to
New York, my internship was in grassroots organizing in housing way
out in Brooklyn. What was the name of it? I’ll think of it. I had a great
mentor — organizer, very political, you know. We were in a storefront.
So it just brought in all this new experience and information and people.
I loved the grantmaking, I loved the connecting nationally, the sense of
international solidarity work, because that’s what it was really then —
solidarity work.

So it was a big decision to leave North Star and go to Astraea,
but I did it. In Astraea’s office, actually we shared space with New
York Women Against Rape. We had one office, and actually, in that
first year that I left, it was upstairs from North Star and the Funding
Exchange, because we were together with the national office, and then
eventually we came downstairs and we were on the same floor, until we
moved to our space that we’ve been at for eleven years now. So I’ve
always maintained a connection to North Star and to the Funding
Exchange, both a personal one as well as — you know, they’re part of our vast network of progressive and feminist foundations.

ANDERSON: Right. You talked a little bit about the conflict around race at North Star. Was being an out lesbian okay at North Star in that time?

ACEY: It was okay. North Star and the whole Funding Exchange — there were other lesbians and gay people throughout the Funding Exchange network, so it wasn’t, you know. At that time, I was the only — in the beginning — the only lesbian on the staff of North Star, but we were also housed with the national office, where there was another lesbian, Lynn Campbell, who, with Michael Seltzer, had been trying to raise the level of consciousness, not only within the Funding Exchange but throughout progressive philanthropy, around LGBT issues. At that time it was lesbian and gay issues.

But I feel there — at North Star and Funding Exchange — all the progressives, though not just them — So while there were people on staff, people on the boards, in the community funding panels — that lesbian groups or queer groups are being supported, that it was part of an analysis. I didn’t feel like it was a deep analysis or a deep acceptance. The North Star part of all those Funding Exchange funds brought in people from all the communities: political communities, racial justice. People came in with all kinds of political, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation identities. So in the early ’80s, it wasn’t as integrated. It was talked about, it was there on the list. You know, it felt like it was more part of a list. So a group of us — of queers and straight people, very racially mixed — actually took on doing education within the network.

ANDERSON: How did you move from a lesbian and feminist world into more of a queer, LGBT politics and identity? What was that process like?

ACEY: That’s a good question, because I really entered the queer world as a lesbian focused on lesbians, and not unconnected to — Again, it was lesbian and gay, but there was always, under the radar, the bi and the trans, and later on the intersex and two spirit, you know, all those things that a number of groups have adopted in terms of their identities.

So early on, being part of Astraea, I got invited to certain things that were LGBT: meetings, national meetings of the executive directors, creating change conferences. Also, as time went on at Astraea, it was like, lesbians and lesbians of color in particular, and now lesbians of color and trans people of color in recent years, are our priorities in terms of funding. But we fund LGBTI groups when there is some kind of feminist analysis and practice, and there are definitely lesbians and women and trans people in leadership. So it kind of got built, and, of course, doing this work, you come in contact, you form relationships, you do groups. You know, it’s mixed, and so that’s how I became more
involved with the queer movement as a whole, but I entered it really as a lesbian in an organization that was focused on lesbians.

ANDERSON: Did you take on the identity of queer, to use that language, for yourself, or do you still feel more comfortable with lesbian? How has your language changed?

ACEY: That’s been changing the last couple of years, I think. I identify as a lesbian. I often use that language. I find myself saying *queer* more. At first, I was not comfortable with it, or completely comfortable with it. I also try to really be sensitive to who’s the audience I’m talking to, so that I’m talking a language. You know, it’s like, when you talk a language your audience understands — whether it’s one-on-one or a room of several hundred people — or you’re very purposeful because you want to introduce a new word and a concept. So I kind of go back and forth, but initially I was not comfortable with *queer*. I was more comfortable saying *lesbian* when I meant lesbian, *lesbian and gay* when I meant lesbian and gay, LGBT. You know, it’s like, more using the words that I meant and for the purpose. Now it kind of is more blended.

I have to think more about that too, because I realize that my behavior has changed. I think some of my thinking has changed. It’s like, When are you being this? Also, within organizations — including Astraea — there’s been an evolution about queer identity. There’s folks on staff, on board, who may identify as woman or lesbian, or they may identify as a queer woman. There’s so many things. So it’s also about being expansive.

I felt initially — and I still have some reservations — that lesbian, to me, means something very concrete. I know it means something very different to other people, particularly some of the younger women. I don’t buy into, The young women have given up lesbian. I think it’s a little more nuanced than that. And at the same time recognizing a younger generation, or generations, are experiencing sexuality different and how they call themselves. I don’t want to lose either, I want to try to honor both. So that’s in process actually, but I still think of myself as a lesbian.

END TAPE 3
ANDERSON: We’re going just to talk about Astraea for this hour. Let’s talk about what it was like when you were first there — you were the first staff person — how you created a vision and an organization from scratch, and what your goals for it were in the early days, 20 years ago.

ACEY: Okay. Well, you know, I’m not a founding mother. Astraea was started in the late ’70s by a wonderful group of lesbian feminists.

ANDERSON: Do you remember who all of them were?

ACEY: I remember many of the names. I’d have to have that in front of me. Certainly Nancy Dean was the catalyst, I believe. There was the first board, but then they were surrounded by other women who were supporting the whole idea of starting a women’s foundation that supported the idea — even though it was not publicly articulated, beyond certain circles, that they were all lesbians. I mean, I think they started to talk about the idea in the mid- to late ’70s, since Astraea was created in ’77, gave its first grants ’77/’78. So Nancy Dean, Achebe Powell, formerly known as Betty Powell. Joyce Hunter was on that first board. Leslie — her last name is escaping me, she’s an architect. Joan Watts. A number of other people that were on the first board, and then, as I said, many others that they were surrounded by, supporting them.

Astraea was, I think, really the third — actually the fourth women’s foundation to be founded. Now there’s over 120 all over the world. At that time Ms. [Foundation for Women] was already established; a foundation in Philadelphia; and a very small fund called the Barbara Deming Fund. And then Astraea started. Then a few years later, into the ’80s, more women’s foundations started up in other parts of the country. There was also one in Europe called Mama Cash, which is still thriving. They’re based in the Netherlands.

So I actually was on the Astraea board; I believe in around ’83, I went on the board. Then in ’87, we began to expand. The Women’s Funding Network — it had been formed in the mid ’80s — which we were a part of, creating a network of women’s funds. So we decided we needed to expand, and part of that expansion and thinking bigger was to hire staff. So I had experience in a public foundation, and I was encouraged to apply for the job; but also, I was very attracted to trying to take Astraea to the next level. I never dreamed it would be 20 years. I just celebrated, this month — July — my 20th anniversary as executive director.

So I was the first staff person hired, and we shared — We had a little office space within the offices of New York Women Against Rape, which is basically in the same building that I had been working in at North Star and the Funding Exchange — so still in the same spot. And we used to joke that the office was so small that when volunteers and, eventually, other staff came — our desks were back to back — we’d
have to announce when we were going to stand up because our chairs would bump up against each other.

In those early days, I think we were very ambitious. We were a regional foundation at the time. We funded grassroots women’s groups, including cultural projects in film video. The grants were small: they could be five hundred, a thousand, two thousand. We had a newsletter. The board did everything. The board wrote the newsletter, made the grants, did the fundraising. So when I came on, it was to try to grow that and systematize it. So it was exciting.

ANDERSON: And you didn’t have much development experience before that, did you?

ACEY: I had some, because at North Star, while I ran the grantmaking program, everybody on staff at North Star fundraised. We all had major donors and other donors to fundraise from. So I got that experience at North Star, and I thought it was a great model to follow. While you might have an emphasis on your job, everybody did fundraise, and even those that were doing more fundraising were involved in grantmaking. So it was a good integration of the functions, because in the field of progressive feminist queer philanthropy, where you have a public foundation where you’re fundraising and grantmaking, one informs the other, and I’ve really followed that philosophy now for 25 years. I think it’s a very important philosophy, so that you don’t get compartmentalized. You have to have an emphasis, and somebody’s got to be there managing the grants program and managing all the fundraising activities, and Astraea communications, and then the internal systems. But it’s very important to have that integration, so that everybody understands the big picture as best possible and how what they’re doing really — if we’re trying to make social change — how that informs the other.

So in the early years, there was just me and then some part-time folks, and then we started to expand into more staff. Also, around 1990, we felt we needed to make some leaps. We saw that there was still, even in 1990, a huge gap. Not just a funding gap in terms of the lesbian community, but an invisibility. Lesbians were really leaders in the women’s movement, progressive movements, and the queer movements. There were some autonomous lesbian organizations. They were not getting the same kind of support. Then there were emerging, smaller, grassroots, significant groups, and we felt we needed to come out as an organization. It was in 1990 that we said, We need to put lesbian in the name for political reasons — to kind of draw our line in the sand, so to speak, but to take a stand, and not belligerently but boldly, proudly. And also, at that time, we felt a need to go national. Although we didn’t have all the resources to do that, we felt it was important to kind of stake that ground, because we were getting requests from all over.
ANDERSON: Was there dissent among the board and staff about those two things?

ACEY: No. It was pretty much consensus. So in 1990 we basically went national and put lesbian in our name. We’ve always kept Astraee, but the name had been Astraee Foundation, then it was Astraee National Lesbian Action Foundation. And now we’re the Astraee Lesbian Foundation for Justice. So there was consensus in 1990. We also, by that time, moved to a bigger office but in the same building. We took more space than we needed, so we had some other nonprofit groups with us — a battered women’s organization and an African American gay men’s organization — and we just started to build.

We also, at that time, separated the functions of a board of directors and established what we call our community funding panels, which is a model used within the Funding Exchange network of funds, and I had been at North Star. It was a model that was not foreign to Astraee, because the board was a group of women who were activists in many different ways and fields — you know, an activist broadly defined. So it wasn’t a stretch for us to establish a community funding panel, so the board could focus on fundraising and strategic direction.

So we did that and then also — because we didn’t have the resources to make the board completely a national board. We were, at that time, meeting every month, then we moved to every other month, but then the panels would meet once or twice a year. So there was a way to involve more people in the decision making and in the programs, and, at the same time, have this board.

And now our board is completely national, and we’re about to start another strategic plan. We’re going to look at, given that we have an international grants program, where we’re funding in the Global South and East, that we would have — the board perhaps needs to reflect. There’s no philosophical reason not to do it, it’s resources. Again, resources come up all the time, so we’re faced with many tough decisions. Many things are important, but we’re constantly having to prioritize in terms of how much time we have, but also how much money.

When I went to Astraee in ’87, our budget was around $50,000, and it grew, you know, it kind of doubled for the first few years. Going into this fiscal year, our budget is $4.5 million, and we’ll be giving about half away in grants.

We also work very closely with grantee partners. We’ve got a lot of new programs. I’m excited about all of them — the ones we still have — but also we initiated, this past year, a movement-building, multi-year grantmaking program, and this is where we can give larger grants to groups in the U.S. We’ve been doing that through another program internationally, but in the U.S., it was just initiated this past year. So it’s groups that we’ve been working with, and as we get resources, and as this program evolves, it may be also groups we haven’t — grantee partners who are themselves emerging, doing incredible organizing and policy work and advocacy work. We now
have the capacity, through different funding streams, to give them multi-year grants of $50,000 a year for three years — at least three years — and we’re also initiating this program where we’re bringing them together so they can strategize and do skills building among them — and that will happen this fall.

So that’s very exciting, because we’re looking at that as, How do we impact the queer movement? These groups work, in many instances, across movements, but with a queer identity. I use [the word] queer now. I never used to.

Our focus at Astraea — in terms of our grantmaking programs and constituencies — are lesbians of color and trans people of color. We prioritize and feel those are the least resourced. And the political dynamics and oppression that surround those groups is complicated, when you look at the intersections of so many — I want to say issues, but it’s about people’s lived experience — as women, as transgender identity, as people of color, as young people, older. So we have tried to take and prioritize where many of our resources go.

And we also fund LGBTI organizations who have a feminist perspective — whether they use the word or not — and have a gender perspective but also look at issues of race and class and that analysis. Because so many of the groups that we work with are faced with that on the ground, and those groups tend to be invisible, just like in the broader culture, in society, the groups — whatever their sexual orientation or identity — it’s the same experience.

ANDERSON: How have you done the capacity building and the education internally, to be able to get to that philosophy about your grantmaking?

ACEY: First of all, Astraea’s core values have stayed the same over these 30 years. We’re celebrating 30 years. I’m 20, and Astraea is 30, and that, to me, is the bigger anniversary, because it just — That we have survived, that we’ve grown, is very important. That — in the growth — that we have really stayed committed to the core values. Because sometimes you can grow, and it can slip away from you here and there. We’re not perfect, but we do try to do things with some kind of intentionality. So I think, in terms of the evolution, a lot has been influenced by those core values, but also that the people who step into leadership roles — I’m talking about myself, I’m talking about key board members, key staff, who keep helping to push on and kind of influence how we walk the talk.

So of course there’s — When you make a change — and even with the inclusion of trans people, in terms of the inclusion in the grant-making program and elevating trans people as a priority, particularly trans people of color, there was not any big dissent or tension. There was an exploration, a curiosity to understand. I think when you get some of us who are older — and we’re used to a certain way of thinking, and also, who have taken on an identity of lesbian — to try to
understand this from a broader gender perspective — not gender as female or male.

So there’s been more of a curiosity, because I think the instinct of staff and board at Astraea, and also those more intimately involved, and even our donors and our grantees, has been to do the right thing, to think, and to see this in a broader perspective. So the experience of putting some new programs in place has gone rather smoothly. As I said, not without some bumps. There certainly is more education we need to do internally, and to externalize that, not only around trans people but around other constituencies that we feel we could do better where there’s invisibility. I think the disabilities communities is one area that I feel we have room for growth. I think we’re about to start, this fall, a strategic plan. So we will be looking at key issues. I think they’re organizational issues, but they’re political issues at the core. So the board composition — you know, the international issue. Also, the board has been pretty much lesbians or queer women. That’s kind of evolved.

ANDERSON: Do you have a mandate about filling categories around race or gender or sexuality?

ACEY: Yes, and we’ve always — From the very beginning, Astraea’s board — It’s part of the bylaws that at least 50 percent of the board must be women of color, and there must be diversity in that. Pretty much, that mandate’s always been filled. We’ve never wavered from that, but the percentage is much higher — 60, 70, 75 percent sometimes, women of color. And on the board we also look for geographic diversity and people with different kinds of experiences.

So when we talk about diversity, it’s more all the manifestations of it. It’s more about inclusion too. So, for example, if we find ourselves — You know, boards — there could be some attrition and turnover and tenures filled — so there are some times when we find ourselves — For example, the board might be one-third women in their twenties, and then all of a sudden there’s no women in their twenties. So you’re always having to look and see who’s at the table. Is there representation of perspectives there? Because no one or few people can represent so many. There is that kind of consciousness and self-awareness.

ANDERSON: How would you say Astraea’s evolved around the issue of race over the last 20 years? What are the conflicts and the struggles, the challenges that you’ve had around race? Even though it’s been so central, and even though it’s been led by women of color for 20 years, it can’t have always been smooth or simple.

ACEY: The issues of race — if you only look at diversity, then you’re not really looking at race. So for us, it’s been about, not just diversity, but how are we practicing antiracism throughout? What does that look like?
What kind of internal education do we need to be doing? How do we talk about race? How do we understand racism? How do we understand the context of the U.S.? And for Astraea it’s, how do we understand the context globally? Because cultures are so different, and how race is constructed in different cultures outside of the United States is different — although, personally, I feel there’s racism all over the world.

And then also, when you have diversity and inclusion, race looks different, even within different communities of color here. And what does that look like, and what’s the history of that, and how does that impact and influence relationships? And then also, when you have white women together with women of color, all those dynamics come up.

I think at Astraea there’s a commitment — and I don’t think we always take the time necessary to do the internal education, but we have and we’ll continue to do that. But there’s also, I think, an accountability among people in meetings and programs, so that it’s become very integrated, not always perfect. Are there tensions at times? Yes. Are there areas where we need to deepen both our understandings and practices? Yes, but it’s foremost.

ANDERSON: Can you give me an example of something that’s happened that’s been a pivotal movement in Astraea’s reckoning around race and racism?

ACEY: It’s a good question, a tough question. Well, I think there’s always — certainly at the grantmaking level, we’re pretty clear with our criteria as we fund groups, but we also try to engage with groups. So there are moments, I think, when, within the grant decision, talking about what our interpretation, our understanding of what another group is doing and how we see — You know, I don’t think we’re doctrinaire, but we do have these criteria. So I think there have been some discussions at the community funding panel that address this, and sometimes difference. You know, is this group engaging in a way that makes sense? And some people may feel a different range of things. An example might be, if a group is a multiracial group, but there’s very few people of color in leadership — you know, what does that look like? How do we engage with them? We don’t have this quota, it has to be X, but if there is not some evidence. So that can lead to some different kinds of discussion.

Sometimes it’s just very clear cut. It’s when you get into certain gray areas, or you’re looking at certain regions of the country where there are smaller proportions of people of color communities. What is the expectation? Because then the expectation is not so much around who’s at the table. I mean, some of that, but how are you taking on race? So how do we balance that with our criteria, our understanding?

But you have to be careful not to be arrogant in that, and I think we succeed for the most part. I think there have been a lot of deeper discussions when you’re making those grants, because you want to be
really fair to the groups, but at the same time, you have this bigger vision and sense of what it’s going to take to change things.

I think, at the board level, whenever we’re talking about a policy — because, you know, that’s where a lot of the policy decisions get made. So it could be anything. How are we reaching out in terms of getting new members, to make sure that our membership is reflective of the communities we’re working with, and not only, say, white women of means.

Right? And not to make assumptions that also lesbians of color, queer women of color — Our donor base is fairly broad. I would say the majority of the donors, probably — I’ll take a guess — 80 percent are lesbians or queer women, but there’s also heterosexual women, gay men, some straight men, who are supportive. So we look at how we’re fundraising too, so that we think of people we’re asking to support our programs and our mission as our constituency, and we want that to be an educated constituency in terms of us trying to express what we’re doing, but also to have that inclusion there.

I think — when we look at what kinds of events we do. You know, who’s on the stage? When we are looking at an investment policy for our small endowment — we have an endowment now and it’s grown to about $3.9 [million], and we’re hoping to launch another endowment some time in the next couple of years or sooner. Like, what do those investment policies look like not only around race but antimilitary, tobacco, those things?

So we’re constantly, I think, looking at issues that are not just race but cross different issues. Corporate fundraising. Who will we fundraise from? What kind of social screenings? We will accept corporate money, but we always look at, What’s that company represent? And nothing is pure.

I’m trying to think of some other policies where it comes up. I think where it comes up constantly — because we think about the constituencies we’re serving, but we also think about this broader framework of social justice, which for us means racial, social, economic, gender justice. As I said, we make mistakes. We don’t always do the right thing, not intentionally. Because there is a broad participation of board, staff, panels — there’s a lot of things that come up and that we try to resolve.

I think, and you know — and I need to provide more leadership myself. I think that how we take on disability, the issues surrounding that kind of discrimination and oppression, invisibility — I think we could do more in that area, and we’ve been saying that for a number — It’s not like we don’t do anything, but I don’t feel that we have truly integrated a politic and a practice, that then also is internal as well as external.

ANDERSON: Where does Astraea fit in the larger world of funding? What are your relationships like with the other progressive and feminist funders?
ACEY: It’s interesting, because I’ll often joke or we’ll be planning — I think because of our political perspective, we feel we cross many funding networks and entities and groups — women, progressive, public charity, LGBTI. So it demands that we’re in different places, and we’re actually looking at how, in this next period, how we can focus and perhaps have more influence both in what we bring to the table and what we bring home from the table.

I think, in terms of women’s philanthropy and progressive philanthropy and queer philanthropy, I feel, given our age, we’ve played a leading role. Astraea’s a founding member of the Women’s Funding Network. We are very involved. I and board members and other staff have served in leadership positions in the Women’s Funding Network — the board, the conferences. I think we bring a perspective that is unique, shared in many ways by others, so I think we’re respected.

I don’t always feel, across the board, even with progressive public foundations, that people truly get the lesbian and LGBTI issues in a very deep, visceral way. People may like the work we’re doing, they may like individuals. They may be, you know, giving (inaudible) the progressive or feminist, be very supportive. But I feel overall, collectively, in the foundation world and the world at large, there’s still some work there to understand and prioritize, and I think even in the women’s movement.

It seems like many people think the issues are resolved. And so, say an issue that has a lot of publicity and work going behind it and media — say, marriage and civil unions — those are important issues, and we should have our rights. That’s without getting into the different strategies and goals about getting there. Whatever you think about marriage, I think, bottom line, queers should have the same rights.

But without getting into that, I think that, you know, my point is more that I feel my colleagues in the funding world — While there’s been progress in the 25 years I’ve been in philanthropy, it has been so slow and incremental. We are still seeing very little money going to lesbian and to LGBT groups in the U.S. and internationally, and particularly groups that have an intersectional analysis, particularly groups that are smaller, particularly groups that are led by people of color or lesbian and trans. Particularly those groups. Now, is it every single one? No. Some groups get more attention. But overall, I feel that there is so — While we’ve had progress, there is not a deep, deep understanding about how you integrate that. But I think that’s a reflection, also, of the progressive movement in the United States, in which I do see some evolution and kind of coming out of the doldrums and understanding how all these issues work together. Because they’re not just issues, they’re about people’s lives, when you talk about racism and class and gender and identity and sexual orientation, sexism.

I was in a meeting recently with people I worked with for many years — a collaboration — and people who I know support equal rights and justice, because that’s their focus. I felt the need to say, I don’t feel, as a group and even beyond us, that people are really embracing in a
deep way the issue of sexuality and LGBT human rights. I feel a lot of personal support, but that’s very different than getting — particularly some of these leaders — to get it integrated in their programs and to be at tables, and to be talking about it, not from a list, not like, Oh, and we believe in the rights, but to be able to really articulate what it means to be queer in the United States, what it means to be a young, queer woman of color, and to have their programs and their missions kind of more reflect that. Maybe not their missions, but at least it was received.

But I find that, in doing this work still in 2007, I can be at some meetings that are progressive and talking about movement building with other funders, and still be the only queer in the room, still be the one that says, “Where are the queers here?” Not in the room but in the literature, in the program that’s going to be put out, you know, from every different angle. It’s exasperating, it’s painful. I feel like it’s my job too, but sometimes it’s shocking. Once in a while, I’ll still get that sick feeling in my stomach, Okay, I’ve got to speak up now — but you have to speak up, and I’m sure my colleagues are in these situations too. It’s not just me. I’m kind of using my own experience, but I know my colleagues come back from meetings and conferences with similar experiences.

ANDERSON: Do you feel a similar way when you’re with LGBT funders, around talking about race or class? You know, is there one place the women’s funders, the LGBT funders, where there is really shared understanding, you’re not a lone voice? Or is it, no matter what group of colleagues, you’re having to push something, some piece of this?

ACEY: There are other places that feel more like home, and I use that very — you know, where there is –

ANDERSON: And what are those places?

ACEY: They’re more isolated than ongoing, and there are certain colleagues who I know get it, who are also running institutions — funding institutions, private and public. But there’s no one gathering, one network, one meeting that I feel that it’s all there together. There are some places where I feel it’s — I would say for the most part, I don’t feel it’s all there together in a consistent place. There are moments, there are some gatherings. I’m thinking of a couple of instances where there are enough people in the room that get it. It’s not the whole group, but there’s enough people in the room that get the intersectionality. Excuse me for using that term, but to try to get the interconnectedness of people’s lives and how that works within oppression and a discrimination field, if you will, and how that means —

To me it’s like, every single day of your life — you could be a white lesbian and poor; you could be a wealthy woman with a lot of privilege; you could be a person of color of any race — each day, you have to think about these issues. Each day it’s got to be kind of a
question and a challenge to yourself: How am I going to take this on? You can’t take on every single thing, you can’t have a fight every place you go, but how do you — If you want things to change, not only for yourself but for the people you love, the people you care about, the people you’ve never met. Like, how are you going to take this on in a way — personal, what’s your personal commitment? So it’s got to be a life — it’s a life journey. And you just say, In order to make this world better, if I’m going to do anything, even influence a small group of people, then I have to take on all these things at once. I have to be doing self-education, I have to have curiosity, I have to act, I have to figure that out. It’s hard but it’s not, like, impossible.

ANDERSON: What gives you hope in that direction? I mean, you talked about the movement and stuff you’re doing internally, which is very exciting and I think something that you’re really going to be proud of. Do you also see other directions in the larger movement of philanthropy?

ACEY: I do, in philanthropy but also in the movements.

ANDERSON: Yeah. You don’t have to separate them.

ACEY: Yeah. First of all, my feeling about philanthropy is a very ambivalent one.

ANDERSON: Say more.

ACEY: You say, Oh nice, you’ve spent the last 25 years doing it. But both North Star and Astraea, for me, are vehicles, they’re tools. If either one were veering off a path of thinking of themselves as more than a tool, bigger than they are, more important then they are in the world of philanthropy — Philanthropy is there to serve, and to really be a reflection of where the movements are going. Philanthropy should not be directing or guiding. Now you have to have criteria that come out of how you think change can happen, and that need to be really transparent, but we’re only a vehicle.

Those groups on the ground — and when I say on the ground, they could be organizing groups or they could be big national or international — and there’s a difference, and I have a bias in some directions, but you need it all. There’s a difference between the big national or internationals, that’s what I’m saying. Those movements have to be self-determined. We’re there to serve in the context of how can this money, these connecting people — We know a lot of groups. One of our responsibilities is to make sure they know each other. We can encourage them, we can have dialogue, but we’re only a vehicle.

We talked earlier about Astraea’s growth. So to me it’s not simply about — it’s not even about building the institution. We have to build the resources. So in some ways, you’re building the institution, but if you’re building the institution just to get bigger and you don’t
have a sense of what that’s connected to, and humility about that, then I feel that you’re not really helping to influence change. I’m not sure what your question was.

ANDERSON: Oh, about hope. What gives you hope in terms of movement building?

ACEY: What gives me hope? I think a few things. I feel what gives me hope is that, in terms of Astraea, what I said earlier — that we’ve been able to grow and maintain the core values has been very important. I’m always very conscious of the risk involved in doing that.

What gives me hope in terms of philanthropy? I see some of my colleagues really evolving and really trying to be a reflection of what’s happening in different movements — the women’s movement, the whole broader social justice, peace and justice, the immigration rights movement, housing. I mean, we just go on and on. Environmental justice, and all those different areas that impact people’s lives, and plus what we’re doing. I see that there’s a better understanding among groups about how this all works together, and a struggle, more of a struggle, to make alliances and coalition, but that the analysis —

I feel like, for a long period, our analysis as progressives — we were kind of lazy, not very disciplined, what might have been struggling — So I see this kind of growing out of — not from progressive think tanks so much, but from the movements on the ground and the relationships building there. So that gives me hope. I see different communities taking power, taking initiative, and they are working together more. It gives me hope to see, in the queer community, that the leadership of people of color and women has not necessarily trickled up, but I see change even in some of the national groups. So those are the things that give me hope, and I’m just kind of a hopeful person, or why get up in the morning?

But I do see, from my own discussions — both on a personal level and organizational, not just from a philanthropic perspective but from a real political — that people are thinking and acting different politically than we have in a long, long time. So I think there’s hope there. I think in philanthropy, in some of the circles that I am moving in, [people] are trying to think of more creative ways of thinking outside of the box. So instead of just about fundraising, how do we finance these movements? Not just fundraising, but how do we finance them? How do we do — some colleagues have been using, within the international network of women’s funds movements, a term, wealth creation, for the movements.

So right now these are terms and frameworks, you know. And sometimes an idea takes on, but it’s kind of thinking beyond, Oh, we’re these institutions, we fundraise, we create this broad donor network of small and large gifts — because that’s what we are — to, Wait, there’s something else here. We know, even if Astraea were to double its budget, it is such a drop in the bucket. Which is not to minimize the money that goes out or what it means to the groups that are getting it. It
means, you know, they can do things; but also just for morale, that somebody wants to support their work — because often we’re the first funder or one of, you know, a few. Some groups go on to be able to do that, so I don’t want to minimize that role. To try to think out of the box — which really gets to the economic system and who holds the power, and how to play with that some and push on it.

ANDERSON: We have about ten minutes left. So why don’t you talk about, you know, with your 20-year anniversary coming up, what you think your legacy will be at Astraea? Will Astraea ever survive, plucking you out from the center of it? And what your vision for yourself is beyond Astraea, if you have one. Do you think they’d survive without you?

ACEY: Well, I feel like, if Astraea doesn’t survive without me, then I have failed. So I believe that if I were to leave at any moment, that Astraea is strong enough to survive without any one individual. You know, we have people who — We have one of our beloved and strong board chairs leaving soon. She even extended her term, since we’re going through transition. I think to myself, How am I going to survive without her? And then I think, I will, there’s other people coming up. But it means changing and adjusting.

There have been key staff over the years. There’s a key staff person now, who needs to go and do her next dream journey for herself. It leaves a big hole in my heart, but in our program too, and she’s going to be missed by many, many people, but it’s also what she put in place and her leadership. There have been other staff. The many staff that come through Astraea, you know, they stay for a short time and they make a contribution. And also thinking of some that have stayed longer, like six, nine years. They left, and they left their work and something to build on.

So I think, Astraea’s 30 years old, they were 10 before I got there. I, you know, except for that first year, maybe two, [was] the only staff person, but there has always been an engagement of the board and the staff who are there. We’re now staffed with, I think, 17. I’m kind of losing track.

To me, being at Astraea was about helping to build a movement and the resources for it. Now, I’m not good at everything, so, you know, I’m sure if I left tomorrow they’d find a mess here or there, but I feel there are structures in place and there is leadership. Astraea does not depend only on me, which is — I’m not trying to have any false humility. I’ve worked hard, I am a leader, I understand that. I have a responsibility. But it’s very important to know that you don’t do these things by yourself. You might be a driving force, other people are driving forces. So I have no worries about Astraea in my departure.

I thought I would leave at 20, and it didn’t work out that way. Some of my friends say, Well, there’s always going to be something that you want to do there, and there always seems to be. There’s always, Well, after this gets done. But I feel I’ve stayed as long as I
have because it’s been this place where I could grow and the organization was growing. Not without some bumps and steps backwards, but overall, I feel that I’ve had this great privilege to be in a job where I feel that I’ve been able to be the person — be all the parts of me. Even when I am in those meetings and I kind of have to raise my hand. But, you know, there’s this core group. It’s kind of like a shelter. No place is completely safe, but there is this pillar that’s keeping you together. So I’m not sure when I’m going to leave. I can’t imagine that I would be there more than a couple more years.

In this coming year we’re doing a strategic plan. We have kind of a transition plan in place, not so much like when I would leave, because a lot of people have different definitions of a transition plan. It’s like, Pick your successor and when are you leaving? That’s very simplistic. The board needs to hire who’s going to come behind me, not me. I try to hire people who are leaders and can do their job, and if they can move into this position, great, but it’s like, Can they do that work?

So I think in a couple years, it’s quite possible that I would be gone. I have a two-year contract. I do want to see through this strategic plan and make sure there’s a very good succession plan that has everything set up — the structures that need to be there, and that’s pretty much in place or in process as well as, you know, a system, the next steps, the different committees, and things like that. It’s a lot more complicated and boring succession plan, but — on the minds of some people sometimes. What’s my legacy? I don’t know.

I think the thing — which is not like this one, concrete accomplishment — that I’m most proud of, that I feel I’ve been a part of, is just to have that consistent commitment to our core values and to social, racial, economic and gender justice. I mean, I just feel, to me, it’s the thing that makes me the most proud. Yeah, we’ve put in creative programs, we’ve built, we’ve grown, we’ve got some good expertise. But when I think of, overall, that with all those things — any program, any initiative — they have been extensions — whether it’s been in grantmaking or fundraising — they have been extensions of those core values. And that there has been a constant flow of different people coming into the organization, having influence, making an impact, moving out. That’s what I think.

It’s been a challenge. There are some days when I think, like, What the hell am I doing here? Tomorrow — it’s it. The thing that I’m most proud of in terms of those things is that other people who have left the organization have taken with them something too.

ANDERSON: When you’re finished with Astraea, do you imagine another leadership position in an organization or foundation? Or do you have a different dream for yourself after this?

ACEY: Yeah. I never saw myself as moving. They always say, Never say never, but I have never had the ambition or the aspiration to leave Astraea and go into another philanthropic. To me it was like, it was
about Astraea. It was not about philanthropy. It was about the political values, the programs. It was not about philanthropy.

After Astraea, I do not see myself — You know, I’m 57, get through these next two years, I’ll be 59. I do not have the desire to lead another organization. I more know what I don’t want to do, and I think that’s a combination of being there so long and also my age. It’s a tremendous responsibility, and a commitment of time and energy, which I don’t regret, but I feel like, as I move into my sixties, it’s not where I think I’m going to be spending my time.

You know, I love to train. I’ve been asked to do panels and workshops, but some trainings, and so that’s intrigued me, and so that might be a way. I’m being encouraged to write. I never have enough time to write. I’m not a great writer, but I’m a decent writer with some guidance. And then I feel like, let things open up, you just don’t know. I would like to take some time off in between, and then I’m just, like, open to possibilities. I’d like to make sure I spend more quality time with my friends and my family and my dog.
“The women’s movement was ready for a lot of what I was ready for, but there were some things I was ready for that the women’s movement was not.”

Dorothy Allison

November 2005
Dorothy Allison is a well-known literary feminist and the author of widely read novels *Bastard out of Carolina*, national book award finalist, and *Cavedweller*. Since the success of these publications, she has become a sought-out speaker and guest faculty at colleges around the country. But the Dorothy Allison I was first introduced to was a sex-radical, a rebel performer at the Bulkead performance space in the late 80s in Santa Cruz California. Her readings were outrageous, perverted, bawdy, and, like *Bastard* and her other published works, came from a deeply held feminist conviction about autonomy of the body and sexual freedom. Indeed Allison’s movement connections have a long history that predate and inform her creative work.

During the late 80’s and early 90’s, Santa Cruz, California saw an explosion in radical sexual culture and the Bulkhead Gallery was its most visible and controversial outlet. The Bulkhead was in operation from 1989 to roughly 1994 (in a leased space on Bulkhead Street for the first two years and as a sponsor of events in other venues for the last three or four.) Featuring some of the best talent from both the queer and leather communities, artists included notables such as Dorothy Allison, Pat Califia, Lani Kaahumanu, Wendy Chapkis, and others. Kate Bornstein’s play, *Hidden: A Gender*, and Catherine Harrison’s work on the dominatrix scene, *Permission*, were produced as a double-header. But it was Fakir Musafar’s *Torture Circus*, a frenzy of performances addressing body alteration, pleasure, and pain, which put the Bulkhead at the center of the culture wars over the expression of sexuality and attracted the attention of Ann Simonton and her anti-porn activist organization, Media Watch. Echoing other feminist attacks on fringe or radical sexuality, Simonton equated S/M with violence against women. She wrote, “What’s most dangerous and damaging is when they show a woman enjoying sexual abuse. I’m not attacking the homosexuality involved, it’s the glamorization of sexual violence that is presented to the public. This is not an appropriate way to entertain or eroticize our lives.”28 And like her predecessors, Simonton mobilized. Media Watch contacted the Bulkhead’s sponsors and urged their withdrawal of support and staged street protests at the performances. The controversy ensured the sellout of future events until the performance collective disbanded a few years later.

The Bulkhead was not the sole location of queer politics in Santa Cruz. The college, always a home for progressive thought and activism, had been offering courses in gay and

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lesbian studies (and then queer studies) since the mid-1980s. Gay and lesbian students were vocal, radical, and worked in coalition with feminists and students of color to demand more funding, more courses, and more faculty that met their needs. Wendy Chapkis, an instructor at UC Santa Cruz during the late 1980s and co-founder with her partner Gabriel of the Bulkhead, produced a gay and lesbian radio show on KUSP called “Radio Q.” And with the rise of sex radicalism and a vocal, youth-oriented post-AIDS queer culture, came backlash, the kind seen in Minneapolis over pornography legislation and over the Barnard Conference on Sexuality just a few years before. Chapkis remembers,

I think the low-point for me was when somebody scrawled on the wall of the Saturn Café: ‘Wendy Chapkis promotes violence against women and encourages rape.’ I remember seeing that, and thinking, okay, it can’t get much lower than this. My name is being scrawled on bathroom walls. It was awful. And it was really ugly. And it really, really divided the feminist community in Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz is this interesting place in that it has created and sustained both very high profile anti-prostitution, anti-S/M, anti-pornography, anti-anonymous-sex feminist activists like Nicki Craft and Ann Simonton, and feminist sex radicals like Susie Bright or myself. We have all been nurtured and produced by the same community. It’s an interesting and odd thing that it all came to a head in the last 1980s and early 1990s.29

While Dorothy Allison’s role was minimal in the swirling controversy over the Bulkhead, she came to be a featured performer there, seasoned by her own central role in similar conflicts on the East Coast. A self-proclaimed pervert, Allison’s leadership in the community of sexual outcasts began in 1980 when she and others founded the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM) in New York City. The LSM statement of purpose in 1982 was “a support and information group for lesbian and bisexual women interested in so-called ‘politically incorrect’ sex—fantasy and role-playing, bondage, discipline, S/M, fetishes, costumes, alternate gender identities, and so forth.” Membership was open to women with a “legitimate interest” in the above activities, though experience was not required. More importantly was the observation of LSM’s principles: confidentiality, consensuality, safety, and the right of women to explore their sexuality as they choose.30 Of that founding moment, Allison recalls,

At a certain point it just became obvious to me that the women I was falling in love with—one of them was going to kill me, and that I had to do something about it, but I couldn’t figure out anything. I was a feminist. I understood incest. I understood the conditioning of violence. I understood self-hatred. I understood a whole bunch of

things. It never changed anything. I’m like, Alright, what is really going on here? Why? And especially after I started interviewing people about fetish and all of that eroticization. I was like, Okay, what if I organized my sex life the way I organized my political life? Could we really make this a litter safer and saner? And that was the whole premise of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, which is, what if we really just tried to make it a little safer and saner? Some of it was just about getting information. “How to Not Get Killed” was one of our early workshops.31

The explosion of gay and lesbian activism and culture in the 1970s led to the burgeoning of the gay and lesbian Leather community. Leather bars and clubs opened in the 1970s in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco and New York. The country’s first pansexual S/M organization, The Eulenspiegel Society, was created in 1971. And most significantly for women, a leatherdyke collective, Samois, was created in San Francisco in 1978. And in 1981, the community mobilized with the first public meetings of Gay Male S/M Activists and the Lesbian Sex Mafia. One of the first workshops Allison organized for the LSM was “Outlaw Women – Politically Incorrect Sex,” which drew over 400 women. Activities in the early years of LSM included speak outs and discussion groups, play parties, conferences, and participation in more mainstream gay and lesbian events like pride marches. Annual dues of $15 meant access to events ranging from B & B parties (Bondage and BBQ,) workshops on “the artful application of pain and bondage,” and women’s play parties. Allison describes the parties this way:

We honored a lot of dyke drama, (laughs) and made it possible for people to explore some sexual choices in safety, and that’s something we don’t talk about. Because a lot of people have fantasies about their sex lives that are far more extreme than they will ever be capable of acting out on in their life. And they can screw themselves up thinking about the fantasy and never acting it out. Giving them a safe place where they can go play with it, try it out, and see what it really feels like, seemed to me to be a profound feminist act. I still think it is, and I think that’s one of the virtues of organizing sex parties, or organizing environments in which people can do some of this stuff in a place where they’re not going to be trapped; in a place where they’re not going to be endangered; in a place where there are people who, if you’re lucky, have a sense of humor and a little information. That might help a whole bunch. I saw it help a whole bunch.32

On the heels of launching LSM, Allison was asked to join the planning committee of the Ninth Scholar and Feminist conference at Barnard College, “Towards a Politics of

32 Ibid, p. 80.
Sexuality,” that was held in April, 1982. A watershed moment in feminist politics, what later became simply known as “Barnard” was controversial, even in the planning stages. Organizers included Carol Vance, Ellen Willis, Ellen Dubois, and Gayle Rubin and the taboo topics to be addressed included pornography, prostitution, S/M, and adolescent sexuality. Planning began in September 1981 with Carol Vance at the helm. The planning committee began from this intellectual framework: that “feminist work on sexuality starts from the premise that sex is a social construction,” intersecting with “economic, social and political structures in the material world,” rather than “a natural fact.” The intention of the conference was to advance the debate on women and sex that had been commanding urgent attention from activists and academics alike, particularly around the issues of pornography and sexual violence.

In the first “diary entry” of the conference (a document chronicling the thinking and process of the planning committee and later confiscated by Columbia University), Vance laid out the issues on the minds of the group. Initial questions concerned patriarchy and sexual pleasure, taboo sex, the relationships between social structures and sexuality, and the lesbian “problematic.” As the planning continued over six months, the questions raised within the group touched more and more on the friction among feminists over the topic of sex. In October, the group wondered if the “sexual revolution had been a fraud for feminists” and if lesbianism had become so “emotionally loaded” that feminists had backed away from discussion, and how can women have a “personal life” that wasn’t scrutinized by others.

But it was the debates over pornography that would be Barnard’s legacy. Debate over pornography had escalated in the previous years, culminating in the virulent discord over the Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon backed Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance, which was passed by voters in Minneapolis in 1983 and later vetoed by its mayor. An event held at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY in October of 1981 brought together lesbians and feminists from all perspectives to discuss “Censorship, Pornography, Feminism, and Sexuality.” The discussion raised concerns over violence and pornography, the practice of S/M, sexual outlaws and the breaking of taboos, and how and when censorship takes place. The most contentious contingents were the women from the S/M community and Women Against Pornography, a feminist anti-pornography group founded in New York City in 1978.

33 Carol Vance, ed., Diary of a Conference on Sexuality (New York: Barnard Women’s Center, 1982). p. 11
34 Ibid, p. 23.
And while conversation eventually veered towards the New Right, a unifying nemesis, the divisiveness over aggression, violence, and sexuality was only a prelude to the eruption at Barnard months later.

Dorothy Allison’s talk at the Barnard conference, later published in a revised form in Vance’s anthology *Pleasure and Danger*, was titled “Public Silence, Private Terror.” Allison was on a panel called “Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality” with Muriel Dimen, Mirtha Quintanales, and Joan Nestle. At the time, she was on the editorial staff of *Conditions* and had been working on an ethnography of the female-dominant S/M subculture in New York City. Her talked emphasized “both the political nature of commonly held concepts of gender and deviance, and the class bias which dominates sexual theory in both academic and feminist communities.” Taking on the silence in the feminist community around sex and desire, Allison shared her own fears, insisting that she had never felt safe within the lesbian community or among her own friends and lovers. She linked the fear of sexuality to the fear of difference, more generally. Just as racism tears at the potential bonds between women, barriers of sexuality and gender inhibit a knowing of one another and the opportunity for breaking silence. Even more so than race, Allison argued that the “public silence and private terror” over sexuality has erected walls of shame, fear, and guilt.

Incensed about the rumored plans for the conference, Women Against Pornography (WAP), a New York city feminist action group, gathered to protest and stop the conference. When that failed, WAP’s tactics turned ugly and personal, leaving a wake of bitterness and hostility that has plagued debates and relationships for decades now. In this oral history, Allison describes the costs of the “sex wars” in painful detail, which she describes as a “struggle for the soul of feminism.”

In the wake of Barnard, Allison joined the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, a group formed by feminists opposing the anti-pornography ordinances in Minneapolis, but whose mission expanded beyond Minnesota to encourage a liberatory public dialogue about sex and sexuality. Allison’s engagement with organized feminism continues with her work for the National Coalition against Censorship and Feminists for Free Expression. Perhaps her most significant feminist project these days is her fierce support of young writers and of the dangerous kind of truth-telling that is her legacy as a Southern, working class, queer writer and

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36 Allison interview, p. 31
rebel. For Allison, writing is “one of the things saving us now… In our literature we have created a feminist presence that’s powerful. It has changed us, it has changed the country, it has changed the world.”

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37 Dorothy Allison interview, p. 60.
Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted November 18 and 19, 2007, with:

DOROTHY ALLISON
by: KELLY ANDERSON
Guerneville, California

ANDERSON: There you go. This is Kelly Anderson with Dorothy Allison, at her home in Guerneville, on November 18th, and we’re doing an oral history for the Voices of Feminism Project, the Sophia Smith Collection.

ALLISON: Am I in focus?

ANDERSON: You look great. I think you look great.

ALLISON: Is my gray hair glinting in the light, my silver?

ANDERSON: I see none.


ANDERSON: (laughs) So, as I said before we turned on the camera, the purpose of doing this interview for the Voices of Feminism Project is to add your story into the women’s movement record.

ALLISON: Yeah, it’s tricky.

ANDERSON: It’s really tricky, and I know you have — that your history is there. One of the things that I like best that you said — and again, that’s kind of where I wanted to start — “Though rarely acknowledged, women like me remade this world.” And so I’m going to do this interview so we can rewrite the women’s movement from a different perspective.

ALLISON: Or just save it from being erased, which is the thing that constantly happens.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So let’s start with how you found the women’s movement, and what your awareness of it was. Do you want to start with college?
ALLISON: I think I became dimly aware of the women’s in college the last — not freshman — junior and senior year. I believe there was a CR group, and I vaguely remember going to check it out, and essentially panicking, because I was a lesbian and it was — oh my God, it was 1970.

I was 22, 23 years old. And the first thing I did was get the student paper. I got an apartment about two blocks from the [Florida State University] Tallahassee campus, got the university paper, and checked to find out what was going on. There was a literary magazine that was being done out of the Women’s Center. Now, I did not realize that this magazine was not actually publishing; it was just a notice. I didn’t realize how marginal or almost nonexistent a lot of the women’s movement and the Women’s Center was. I just showed up. I just went looking for it. And my hidden agenda was to find the other lesbians, because I did not want to find the bar dykes that I had been dating before. I was making a cross-class movement. And the women’s movement to a certain extent, because by that time I had read enough stuff that I’m like, This really is about me, or it could be about me. Actually, I think what I felt was, it wasn’t about me but it could be about me, because of the class stuff.

ANDERSON: So you stumbled into the Women’s Center and what did you find?

ALLISON: I went for the magazine meeting, but it had been shifted, and I wound up in a consciousness-raising group, and it literally — everything in my life changed from that moment on. I think that that first night I was there — after that, I think I was there every night for a year. Every time that I was not at work, I was there, or very shortly thereafter.

There was a collective household about a block away, and within three months, I had moved into that household. It’s hard to explain, especially now, to young people, because they don’t feel it, but it was like being caught in a riptide and picked up and moved forward really fast. Or like having suddenly been hit by light when you’ve been in a cave. It was just immediate, overwhelming, and, Oh my God, everything makes sense. And, Oh my God, I could do something about this. And the sense of power, of actually being able to do something, was intoxicating, especially since, most of my life, I’d been helpless to — I just had to ride. And to suddenly grab hold and steer myself was what it felt like.

The consciousness-raising group — two things. I fell in love with the first woman I saw in the room, and, as usual, it was a mistake, because I’m always attracted to the wrong ones. She was a completely obnoxious, withholding butch, but, boy, she looked good in those madras trousers and that white rat catcher shirt. She was flopped down in a beanbag chair, so I positioned myself across the room to watch her. But I don’t think I actually registered that much to the other people who were in the room, except that there was an enormous variety of presentation of self, which, for me, is always about class. There were what was clearly a dyke in the beanbag chair, in her riding boots and her
rat catcher shirt. And then there were what looked like university secretaries, in their pearls and high heels. And then a woman in a flannel shirt, who was the classic 70s lesbian. She even had the duckbill in the back, and everything.

I think there were about, maybe, 12 women in the room, and they had that whole thing where you pass the — it was a shell. You could only talk if you had the shell. Do you remember how consciousness-raising groups worked? (laughs) I think there might even have been an announced subject, but nobody paid any fucking attention to it. The first woman to speak actually was the director of the Women’s Center at the time, and she was drunk, which was a little bit startling to me. And I think it was the second or third woman that spoke that just killed me, because it was one of the secretary-looking women — very well dressed, lots of makeup — took hold of that shell like it was a life raft, and started talking almost immediately about, she needed help because, you know, she looked good, she was in control, everything was working. But she woke up in the middle of the night every night — every fucking night — wanting to get up and go drive to Georgia and kill her father. And then she said why. And no person in my life or anywhere in my imagination had ever said it out loud. I didn’t think you could say it loud and still live. And that she was so different from me confounded it. It just changed everything.

There’s this thing that happens. I had gotten used to, as a kid, to moving a lot. I was used to the phenomenon of, land in a new place, present yourself. You always have a story. And I played, when I was young, with being different people when we — because we moved every six months or less. So I was used to the present-yourself. I always had a draft of myself, and I designed the story I told about myself for what I wanted — mostly to be taken seriously. But the moment she started talking, the self that I had been preparing to present, which was about looking good to that woman in that beanbag chair, disappeared. Everything disappeared, and it was like, I am not ready to talk about this, but I’m going to keep coming back and figure out how to talk about this, and how to make a difference.

ANDERSON: How long did it take before you were able to talk about it in that group?

ALLISON: Whew! Well, probably about the same time I started sleeping with the girl in the beanbag chair. A couple weeks, not long, not long. Although the way I talked about it was very careful, very careful.

ANDERSON: What were you censoring?

ALLISON: How complicated incest really is. I was actually censoring who I was, trying to present as middle class, because I had a college education and I didn’t want to be my mother or my sisters, and doing fairly — what I thought was a fairly good job of presenting as middle class. I had a job
with the Social Security Administration. I did not wear high heels, but still, I could look like a secretary, and I was trying.

It would be three years before I would ever really get to the place where I was talking nakedly. And it would be a decade before I could really — before that stuff all cracked and I could really look at it and talk about it frankly. There was just no language. And all the stuff that was deeply complicated about — was impossible to talk about quickly. Sometimes you have to wait for the culture to catch up with you.

The thing that nearly destroyed me, both as a kid and as a young adult, was that being raped could provoke a sexual response, and that you could eroticize violence, which is exactly how I survived. I understand a lot of it now — I’m 58 years old — but I did not understand it back then, and I could not have articulated it. But it does inculcate an enormous amount of self-hatred, and that’s dangerous to talk about.

And even when you can talk about it, I talked about it in very structured, abbreviated ways. And let’s be frank, the early women’s movement was a movement of slogans and simplicity, and I was not simple and I hated slogans. [I broke the silence] and that’s, I think, what triggers a lot of energy and empowerment, and then the long, slow process of actually sorting through all that stuff and starting to make changes in your life. That takes a lot –

ALLISON: A lot. The women’s movement was ready for a lot of what I was ready for, but there were some things I was ready for that the women’s movement was not yet ready for. (laughs)

ANDERSON: I’m sure that’s still true. So it sounds also like, in terms of the group makeup, that there was no stigma around butch-femme.

ALLISON: Oh yes there was.

ANDERSON: Okay, because some people would describe a CR group in the early 70s as strictly 70s flannel lesbian, without any secretaries.

ALLISON: But you’re talking about where it was. It was Tallahassee, Florida, not New York City, not San Francisco. But I also pretty quickly — A lot of the women that were at the Women’s Center were sexually completely uninteresting to me. Flannel lesbians were not where my imagination went. The women who were sexually interesting me were older and more dangerous, and they tended to be old-school butches, and they tended to be drunks or drug addicts.

ANDERSON: And they didn’t go to the Women’s Center, did they?

ALLISON: No, they did not. When I moved there, I had made this decision: I’m not going to do that anymore. I’m not going to go to a Trailways, or the
bar near the Trailways, and meet them. No, no more. I’m going to be good. But you can’t be good. You lose your mind, because the people — there is no way to talk about this in any clean fashion, so I will trust you to manage this material — but they can’t fuck you. These clean, respectable, academic middle-class girls can’t fuck you right.

ANDERSON: Did you try?

ALLISON: Fuck yeah. I even tried training them. But the only ones that would work tended to be genuinely dangerous: drug addicts, alcoholics, people with their own issues of violence. But you could date old-school butches, and they didn’t have any — you know, they could be even not drunk and not alcoholic and not drug addicts and semi-sane, and still know how to make a girl feel right, you know?

So I did the same thing I’ve done everywhere I’ve ever lived. I did these two parallel existences, so that I was at the Women’s Center what seemed like all the time. I don’t think I slept much. I got involved in the university, in the alternative program to the anthropology department there. The anthropology department at Florida State sucked, and it was just completely patronizing, run by a couple of good old boys who were being paid a dollar a year and were not referred to as professor, but as colonel. I mean, it was that ridiculous, really ridiculous.

But then a couple nights a week, I’d go to the pool hall and pick up girls — good girls. And always get in trouble, because the problem with old-school butches is that they’re always looking for a femme to marry. Now the thing you need to remember is that this was also the heyday of sexual liberation and non-monogamy and experimentation, and that hit the women’s community as fully as it hit the heterosexual community. And there was a concept of militant non-monogamy and, boy, I loved militant non-monogamy.

ANDERSON: Did that work for you?

ALLISON: It worked for me. It worked for me for most of my life, because I did not want to be — I didn’t want to marry. I didn’t want to marry (inaudible). I just wanted to fuck a lot and be safe, and for me being safe was being able to send them home, or go home and lock the door. I had to have absolute control (laughs), and so I constructed it. But it got very, very complicated, more complicated after I did move into the lesbian feminist collective which we founded.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I bet. I bet they didn’t like your dates.

ALLISON: Well, they were fascinated by my dates.

ANDERSON: Did you bring them home?
ALLISON: I did every now and again, and there were parties. I would be invited to parties, and some of the women from my collective would go. It was a little bit — it was just like the class stuff, and that was a big part of it. It was a big thing about class, because most of the butches that I found sexually interesting were working class, and they were rough trade. Most of them were older and working, and they had a kind of contempt for women’s-movement lesbians. You know, You girls. And it was very butch, and it was a butch-femme prejudice, because while a lot of women’s-movement lesbians presented androgynously — flannel shirts, boots. Everybody wears flannel shirts and boots, but I got a lace teddy under my flannel shirt, so I can signal femme. But the women from — the older butch women just didn’t — couldn’t read the signals, and really didn’t approve, and the women’s movement didn’t approve of the old school. So the antagonism was mutual.

ANDERSON: Right. And there you are in the middle?

ALLISON: Yes, yes.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So how did you make sense of it?

ALLISON: I fucked and was ashamed, which, you know, is a life pattern. I was used to it. I knew how to do that. And kept getting in complicated, horrific relationships that broke up badly. Lots of dyke drama. My collective was uncomfortable but amused, but also you could — it was a point in which there was a whole lot of — people were actually trying to be radical. You wanted to be radical, so that when I would get shit about it, I could respond by being more radical and accuse the women’s-movement lesbians of being prejudiced against genuine, real lesbians, dykes, you know. And, remember, I never did relationships. I just slept around a lot, so that I never had, like, a lover, and the few times I did, I broke it up pretty fast. Let’s be real. What is exotic? I mean, I knew women that would date me because I was exotic, because I was white trash and rough in bed, and all that kind of stuff, and I did the same thing with black women. They were exotic, and so I would date them. Also, because then you were like, you’re more radical than thou. Don’t we ever lose track of how valuable it is to be more radical than thou. I did a lot of that.

ANDERSON: What was your understanding of yourself around femme and gendered aspects of lesbian identity?

ALLISON: Oh, a failed femme.

ANDERSON: Did you think of yourself that way?
ALLISON: Oh sure, because to be a women’s-movement femme was to be a failed femme, because I was dating women who didn’t think I was femme enough, and I wasn’t femme enough by their standard. I didn’t wear high heels and girdles and do the intense makeup. I really was on this borderline, which a lot of us were. Androgyny was really more comfortable.

I can look at it now, and look at my androgyny, and it was very femme, but it wasn’t the spectacular femme of the working-class culture, and it wasn’t the classy femme of the black women’s culture. That butch-femme scared the bejesus out of me, because I just could not carry all the markers. You know Amber Hollibaugh?

ANDERSON: Yes.

ALLISON: Well, Amber was a successful working-class femme, but I was an intellectual working-class femme, which is a failed femme. So always knowing that I’m a failed femme, I had to be much better in bed and much more aggressive in bed, and that works for a certain kind of femme, my kind of femme, which is, of course, really ridiculous because that’s not what I really wanted in bed, but that’s what I did to get what I wanted. Oy vey!

But I was always feeling wrong. You can get very, very comfortable in the position of knowing that you are wrong — or I got very, very comfortable with feeling like I was always wrong on some level and thinking, Okay, I’ll learn as I go along, and I’ll get better. There’s something about being raised in the Baptist church and being willing to say, “Take me as I am. I’ll get better,” that a lot of the women I hung out with and worked with didn’t seem to have. Poor babies.

Also, being willing to be punished is something that I don’t think people actually understand. I was willing to be treated with contempt. I was used to treating myself with contempt, so that I was willing to be in working relationships with black women and be wrong and be treated with contempt and still come back. I was used to it. People who are not used to it have a problem, or who can’t make peace with it, because it’s all about — It doesn’t last that long, the part where you’re completely wrong, because then you’re doing some work.

Don’t lose track of what was really going on, is that we were all doing major work, from, literally, the physical work of putting together a store from nothing — building shelves, cadging old paint, literally making a habitable space. There’s an enormous amount of physical labor involved in that. Lack of sleep, showing up on time, coming back and doing stuff — all of that is happening in the context of, you’re all talking feminism and theory and discussing your life and flirting and screwing around, but it is all in the context of doing work. And so long as the work is getting done, a lot of that stuff is of less importance.

And being accused of being racist — I was racist, and I could say, “Okay, yes, but right now we have to build these shelves.” And I
was the kind of person who showed up and built shelves. I was the kind of person who just — I was a worker. Never lose track, that constructed a lot, and you build relationships of trust being a worker. That goes across class and it goes across color. It blows up because, then, of course, there will be somebody who wants to be running things and powerful and famous, and they don’t tend always to be workers. They tend to be really good talkers, and that can fuck you up and blow a whole community, and that happened over and over again. Then those of us who were workers, we would just continue.

I was willing to be a foot soldier in the women’s army. I suppose that’s the way to talk about it. So that I didn’t need to be the director. And I was used to setting aside my personal desires and interests in the service of something I believed in. It’s a little bit like becoming a nun. There’s a whole lot of stuff I was willing to give up if it seemed to me that we were actually going to manage to change something and make a difference.

So we went off and formed — and we actually were more — we wanted to be more serious about collective living, because, let’s be frank, this collective that we established as a lesbian collective was largely an activist collective — the big one — and there were essentially 12 women because there were 12 bedrooms. Then there got to be more because some women were two to a room. But we were an activist collective. We were people who put on events, we sponsored marches. We were the ones that were painting banners and holding yard sales and bake sales to, you know, get the paint to make posters, and all that kind of basic organizing. But we were not sharing resources. Some women, most of them were middle class. They were there on their daddy’s dime at the university. In the collective, there were four of us who were not in-students and who had jobs, and would cycle — I would cycle on and off unemployment and having a job, and we tended — we were mostly the working-class women, and we tended to be the ones who were always gainfully employed, and we were always paying for shit. And after a while it’s like, There’s something wrong here. I’m working really hard and your daddy is sending you a check. You know that fight? So we decided to make a real collective and pool resources — one bank account.

ANDERSON: Are you all from working-class backgrounds?

ALLISON: No. I was the only working — Well, Flo never identified as working class. Her daddy owned a motel. You know, she was raised with a working-class ethos and had that mentality, but we wouldn’t articulate it enough to say that. She thought of herself as middle class, but she wasn’t. Morgan was. Daddy was a professor, sent her to a psychiatrist when she was, like, 12 or 13. That’s a clue: if they’ve got enough money to send you to a psychiatrist.

The three of us went off and formed a living collective, and articulated that it was a chosen family, a chosen lesbian collective
family, and we did that for many years and shared resources. It still was always the case that I always had a job. (laughs)

ANDERSON: And you were all still lovers off and on?

ALLISON: Off and on, although mostly after a while not.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So you’re still supporting them.

ALLISON: To a certain extent, yeah, but Morgan could always go to her daddy when things got bad enough. Flo, no. Her family had no real resources, but she was so pretty and she could always, you know, we’d always take good care of Flo.

But then we formed that collective, and then we kept getting in trouble. We moved into a real working-class community, because we could get a cheap house at a long distance from the university, and wound up having a series of run-ins with our neighbors, who disapproved of us profoundly, both as feminists and as lesbians, and they were separate issues but overlapped to a certain extent. And then this guy came to the door with a shotgun one night and it was like, Okay, we’ve got to get out of here. So we moved. And then that coincided with Sagaris. We went up to Sagaris that summer. 1975. Morgan stayed for the second session of Sagaris. Flo and I went back and got more and more violent threats and harassment in that neighborhood, and we had to get out. We wound up making the sudden decision to move to Washington, D.C.

I can’t remember all of why that happened, although I got offered a gig with Charlotte Bunch and Quest and George Washington University. Charlotte Bunch was teaching a feminism class, and I was invited to come co-teach it with her, some of which I didn’t understand why. I knew I was articulate, and I knew I could write, but I didn’t understand why she invited me. I understood more after a while, because, in fact, she wanted to pair with a working-class woman, and articulated some of that.

It was an interesting and fascinating thing to do, but then we shifted to D.C. and continued. We found a house. We still pooled all resources, and it was much easier. I’d been poor all my life, and all of a sudden, I had a kind of a family. You could never ask my mother for money, she never had any, but Morgan could ask her daddy for money, and there was just an access to resources and things. It was an interesting education in class, being part of that kind of a chosen family. We were very articulate about it. We proselytized, and we proselytized for non-monogamy, even when we were basically serial monogamists at different points.

ANDERSON: But it gave you a safety net.
ALLISON: It gave me a huge safety net — huge — and a family. You know, my family is — I wanted a family even in ways that I don’t think I could have articulated. I wanted a real family, the way people talked about family. I couldn’t even look at the way in which my family was real. I could always look at the way in which it had failed utterly, but I still loved them, and I wanted that. I wanted that in a women’s movement model.

So we worked really hard at being family for each other, with resources, emotionally, being physically present for each other, and to a large extent, being our reference point, sharing history. History gets erased or rewritten or re-presented. I told you, you present a story — you move to a new community and you present the story of who you are. But if you live in a collective, there are people who know who you are and you have a shared history, and what you do has meaning in that shared history.

It was very, very powerful, and I loved them a lot, even when we fought almost all the time and had really different interests and goals in life in some ways, in the context of still wanting — we wanted a feminist revolution. I wanted it like a lover. I wanted it like justice. And believing in a form of justice and believing that the women’s movement could make possible justice, that’s the part — it’s so hard to talk about, and it’s hard to talk about the emotional-spiritual connection of imagining justice, of imagining a world in which you are not an animal. Very hard. Even middle-class girls in the 50s were raised as animals. There was a way in which men were real and women were not.

It’s hard to explain to young people today the impact of suddenly seeing yourself as a person with a soul. And they don’t believe it, but you really — you grow up poor, or even grow up middle class, and grow up in a family where you’re always being told what to do, and have no imagination of your life that isn’t in service to someone else. You’re not allowed to imagine your life as a real person. You’re not a real person, you’re a thing or an animal.

The women’s movement for me was almost religious because it articulated that we were not animals; that we were beings with souls and our own lives. And that we had to work so hard to establish a sense of our lives is almost very difficult to explain to young women today. That world we made for them, about that I have no doubt. But they don’t understand that it could be taken away from them. It sometimes scares the bejesus out of me.

ANDERSON: What was different about D.C. in terms of politics?

ALLISON: Well, D.C. had a queer community, a gay men’s community, that I actually — There was a point there when the separatism cracked and I’m like, You know, I don’t even know how to talk to human beings any more. I only talk to other lesbians. And I joined a queer poetry group
that was all gay men and me, and I did it very deliberately. There was a point when I met Alix [Layman], and she said she joined a motorcycle group so she could learn to talk to heterosexual men, and there’s nobody more heterosexual than bikers. So I joined a gay men’s poetry group, because I was going to ease my way into being — I figured, Okay, gay men poets — that’s not like talking to evil-ass trucker heterosexuals. It will help me. You know, I’m moving back into the world. And then starting to read men again, because I had gone through only reading women for a while there. That separatism can get sneaky.

ANDERSON: And you started to be suspicious of separatism then?

ALLISON: Just uncomfortable, feeling like at a disadvantage. I didn’t want to — I just don’t like writing romances, you know? I mean, I loved Patience and Sarah, it’s a great book, but I didn’t even want to write that, no.

ANDERSON: Was there something appealing about gay male writing at that time, that was more edgy or more –

ALLISON: There were some fine poets. I kept getting in trouble, in part, being an editor, because I loved beautiful writing, and a lot of the — Let’s be very frank. A lot of the early women’s movement writing is horrible. It’s badly done, it’s not even — There was this idealized version of articulating women’s stories, and you want the authentic voice. Well, you don’t edit the authentic voice. But I was raised in the South, and in the South, people tell stories that go on for days, and a good version you edit down to a reasonable story.

So when stuff would come in to the magazine, and I wanted to edit it down just to make it more readable or cleaner, I was constantly getting in trouble, because there was that fight. And it actually went on for at least two decades and stalked me all the way to San Francisco, when I was working on Out/Look, which is a mixed queer magazine.

But that ideology of, Don’t mess with the words — I wanted to mess with the words. I wanted the words to be the best they could be. I wanted beautiful language, beautiful and true, and I didn’t see the problem. Well, I did see the problem, but I didn’t agree with the ideology.

And I wanted to write well, and I didn’t write well. This is the tragic thing. You begin badly, and a lot of my early work, you know — I’d write; I’d put it in a box; pick it up three months later, look at it, and, Oh Jesus, this is tedious and badly done. Learning to write better is hard work.

ANDERSON: How do you do that?

ALLISON: You write a lot, and you have to steal time, and so I started taking more and more time. Part of it was, being pushed always to raise money got old. The heyday of direct-mail campaigns — they worked, they were
effective, but it’s copywriting. It’s awful writing, and it in fact encouraged the worst kind of writing, this copywriting fundraising letters.

I wanted to do something different, and I wanted to — even the stories that I tried to write, because I tried to figure out — The first story I think I actually ever wrote was about one of my cousins, who had 12 kids, and she lost her kids to the foster care system, and she would lose them in sets of three, which I always thought was kind of horrific and tragic. So I wrote this story about her and her kids. But it was like I was stupid or something. I didn’t understand how other people see women in that situation, so I wrote what I thought was a complicated, loving portrait of her. But everybody hates women who have — who get drunk and have sex and take up with men and make babies and wind up on welfare. And, in fact, it was hard to articulate a defense of her, and I was all confused about it too. So I had to keep writing the story over and over to make sense of it. Many, many, many versions later it became semi-reasonable, but it was never going to make — it was never going to be what the women’s movement — it wasn’t the story the women’s movement wanted to play.

There were only two women’s movement stories either that clicked: That moment when, Aah, it’s all a plot and I can be a feminist! Or, I have saved my life by finding the perfect lover — which is the lesbian story everybody wanted. How love saved me. Love did not save me. I kept falling in love. But like my sisters, I would fall in love with the wrong people. I could fall in love in 20 minutes, and out of love 20 minutes later. The thing about living in a lesbian collective is that you’re not going to do the lesbian marriage. And I think one of the attractions of the lesbian collective to me was that it was a protection. Years after I had stopped being lovers with Flo and Morgan in that collective, I would still preach the ideology that we were a family, because I did not want to be in a lesbian relationship because I was femme and I always would wind up in these butch-femme relationships where I’m the wife. I didn’t want to be nobody’s wife. I wanted to have great sex. I wanted to have close relationships. I wanted intimacy, but I wanted a protected intimacy, and it was very difficult to construct. The collective protected me and made some of that possible.

Lots of other women I saw doing the same thing. The ideology of non-monogamy was, on some level, a way to organize your emotional-social life in defense of your own bad tendencies. (laughs) You know the joke about, What’s the lesbian’s second date? The honeymoon. You know.

ANDERSON: All right, so back to Washington, D.C. What did it feel like to you to go from the deeper South to Washington, D.C, in terms of race, class?

ALLISON: It was actually a class shift. It was like moving more firmly into the middle class. D.C. is such a middle-class town. It’s all lawyers and concrete, and everybody was either a lawyer or a professor — almost
everyone I knew in the women’s movement — or a bureaucrat, a professional bureaucrat, which is a tremendous — the ones that don’t even have (inaudible) degrees. It’s a huge population.

And moving into the more small press bookstore movement. This is the part that gets left out. Because in Tallahassee we established Herstore. We also started Morningstar Media, and printed books, and we did two poetry books. I can’t remember her name, the author, but “22 Class A” was the title of her poetry book, and it was very lesbian poetry. It was pretty bad. She was actually not so bad. She was a decent poet, but very Paris, very Natalie Barney, very black cigarettes and lust.

Flo was a printer, and Morgan was an artist, and I was an editor and writer, and we ran Morning Star Media. We did t-shirts, we did broadsides, that whole print media. That’s why we called it Morning Star Media and, you know, sold. We didn’t make any money. It was like, get a job to earn enough money to print the stuff to sell it, to never recover your losses.

But then becoming more and more involved with the small press movement, in part because of starting Herstore. And Herstore was a feminist bookstore. Really hard to get credit, really hard to get accounts, really hard to become an established bookstore. And part of how we managed it was in cooperation with the alternative bookstore that already existed in Tallahassee, which was, again, where I met some feminist men. Not very feminist, but they wanted to look feminist. I think they wanted to date — Some of their self-interest meant that they helped us established Herstore, but that meant working with the alternative press movement, which in the South was — it was actually a great place and a great training ground, because writers are different. Writers are — small press people particularly — are willing to consider things and think. So it wasn’t the same as if you’re going to do social action in the South, and you’re going to deal with newspapers and radio and TV — you’re dealing with some enormously self-interested, ruthless, not feminist, antifeminist sons of bitches, but not in the publishing.

Alternative publishing tended to be quasi-queer, socially conscious, lefty, who were really, in some ways, good guys, and starting to publish bad poetry. I wrote bad poems and I published them, and a few bad stories. I’m clear they were pretty bad, but everybody else was writing bad, too, so I didn’t look that awful.

And then becoming an activist in the small press movement. Because a lot of it was, we were trying to run the bookstore, and then as soon as you do any bookstore work, you discover distribution. You discover that distribution in the country is run by the Mafia, and then you’re trying to find alternative distribution or established systems. When I moved to D.C., there was a whole network of people — like Women Make Movies — but a lot of it was about distribution. It’s hard to publish a magazine and get it out if you can’t get the distributors to carry it.
That whole period of the 70s was trying to set up alternative distributions systems, which is about looking at economics and social organization from a different level, and discovering that it really is run by the Mafia. It really is completely unscrupulous. That it is all — It’s one thing to say that there is this level of injustice, but then to discover that it’s all about kickbacks, and that you can’t even get credit, and that your magazine can be put out of business because this other guy wants his magazine, and he can prevent you from even getting distribution at all.

It was fascinating and evil, and we tried really, really hard to counter it and to set up some systems that worked, and it did. Some of that, you could make coalition with the independent press movement because they were fighting the same battle. The Mafia might be a little bit more uncomfortable with me as a lesbian, but they’re uncomfortable with those boy poets. So that was fascinating.

It’s hard even to talk about how many things we did. Just to make a list is almost unbelievable. If you read histories of the Russian revolutionaries — have you ever read any of those stories or biographies? People who go to not just one — a meeting every night. Two or three meetings every night, and are working not on just one big project, but a dozen projects, and who have almost no home life because they’re always doing some piece of work. That’s what we were doing, and the range of things that we were doing is almost impossible even to make a list of. Housing organizing. I got involved in the shelter movement.

ANDERSON: In D.C.?

ALLISON: In D.C., which meant, of course, you have to deal some with the [Roman Catholic] Church people, because they’re fighting, they want to — and in fact, we eventually lost with the Church people. The Catholic Church people took over the shelter that we funded and put in place.

ANDERSON: This was not in connection with D.C. Rape Crisis?

ALLISON: No, no, separate. I actually did work with D.C. Rape Crisis too.

ANDERSON: Did you?

ALLISON: Yeah. I wound up working with a lot of rape crisis, because a lot of family violence and incest is subsumed under those services.

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: And I was continuing to try to attend groups and find some way to articulate that, and to try to look at it. Incest is nasty and complicated. And I was still dating girls who occasionally put me in the hospital. I
needed the antiviolence movement on a lot of different levels, so a lot of work with that, always peculiar.

And because of the articulation of being a lesbian, I kept being involved in abortion rights movements, because for me the abortion rights was also about your autonomy of the body, and that’s a lesbian issue. I’m never going to be — you know, I was not going to get pregnant and need an abortion, but I was fighting for abortion because it seemed to be intimately connected to my own survival as a lesbian woman. And in fact, a lot of the abortion rights people were really profound, powerful feminist heterossexuals who would organize just as fiercely for lesbian rights as abortion rights.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: And made good coalition. Unbelievable number of projects and things that we were doing.

ANDERSON: Do you remember organizations in D.C. around abortion stuff that you were a part of?

ALLISON: Jesus.

ANDERSON: Or the antiviolence?

ALLISON: House of Ruth, I worked on that. I followed out some of the peer counseling stuff from Tallahassee into peer counseling around — Well, it’s hard to talk about, because I had this notion pretty early on that one of the issues of getting people to talk about battery and family violence was the shame, and to find ways to articulate that that weren’t about — The prejudice and the contempt was just so enormous. The immediate response always is, Why did she stay? There was just this enormous directed contempt at women in violent relationships, and I kept getting in violent relationships. I kept trying to be in butch-femme relationships that didn’t go bad, and they kept going bad. And wanting to find a place where I could safely talk about that and not finding it.

And some of the shelter movement work I did was about trying to find a way to talk about violence that could also talk about sexuality that coded violence but wasn’t. Very hard, very hard. So I kept going to community meetings and volunteering, which is how I wound up — It always seemed to me like I was always painting walls and hanging doors.

ANDERSON: Were you able to talk with any of those peers or colleagues, then, about the violence in your current relationships? Were you always hiding that?

ALLISON: Always hiding that. And it was a problem even in the collective, even — Flo and Morgan both knew. We lived in the same household. But
they were not at all comfortable, and there was a lot of their — You know, it was like, When are you going to get over this? It was like being an alcoholic and being treated like an alcoholic, and it’s like, you know, it goes there really easily. I mean, I’m dating her because of how she presents and how she flirts and how, in fact, how good she is at fucking me right, because you, when we have sex — I love you a lot, but you’re too tentative and unsure of yourself. She’s aggressive and sure of herself. Even if she’s not going to tie me to the bed, she knows what she’s doing. You don’t. No matter how much I love you and am attracted to you, sex with you doesn’t work. That’s a hard conversation to have. I can have it now, at 58. I could have it at 40. But this is back when I was in my late twenties and early thirties. It was really hard to have that conversation.

ANDERSON: Well, there’s so much stigma around that kind of sex.

ALLISON: Yes, yes. And let’s be also clear, it was not as well organized. By the time I moved to New York, I started working at organizing and at putting together discussion groups where, Let’s talk about the fact that I could have a really good friendship with you, but we can’t fuck because you are not my stuff. My stuff is dark and dangerous, and if I can keep it, control it, negotiate it. You know, not date an alcoholic; date a sober alcoholic. Not date a drug addict; date a sober drug addict. Not date a woman who is going to put me in the hospital. Date someone who is going to tie me to the bed and make me really happy. This is very —

And there was just such a horror, especially since, at the same time, I was working in the anti-rape movement and in the shelter movement, but in the shelter movement was where I would find women who could talk about it, and who could talk about falling in love with somebody who would slap you. And that sometimes a slap feels like a caress, and to actually begin to have those conversations. That’s where I began to have those conversations. I couldn’t have them in my academic, literary feminist world. Nobody would talk about it, and they didn’t have — or if they had the feelings, they were not going to admit they had the feelings, or that they had the experience.

ANDERSON: Those who were in the shelters were all straight, no?

ALLISON: No, no. One of the surprises — they would code straight or appear straight, and then you start talking and you discover that, well, no, the Jo she’s running from is a woman. Early on, particularly, people would be trying to pass as heterosexual, leading violent lesbian relationships — and violent lesbian relationships with kids. That was, like, the secret of the shelter movement, but it was still 10 to 20 percent. The majority were heterosexuals, yeah, but a lot of the people who worked there — let’s be very clear — were lesbians.

A lot of the lesbians who worked there were in violent relationships, because we were looking for a way to talk to them to get
help. I can’t tell you how many times you’d go to a meeting, working on antiviolence shelter work, and then you all go out for a drink and you start talking about your girlfriend and, you know, How’d you get that cut on your throat? Yeah, walking funny today, aren’t you, honey? They were all talking, but you have to drink to be able to talk about some of it. And you have to be able to trust people, so you have to get to know them well enough, and you have to figure out who you can’t trust.

Some of the organizations blew up and you could get fired. Some of it was queer baiting, but some of was, you know, You have a psychological problem. You are a dangerous person to be in this position, trying to help women. You can’t help women, you have a problem. Yeah.

ANDERSON: So did you end up finding tools or healing in those places? Were you looking for it?

ALLISON: Underground and around about, yeah. (laughs) But more and more in terms of an articulated sexual freedom movement, outside the shelter movement.

The other thing you need to remember — because by that time, it’s ’76, Jimmy Carter, and then moving on from Jimmy Carter, and all of a sudden there was money coming down from the federal government into these organizations. That’s how we lost the — we, I say we. Many of us who had worked on getting the shelter established in Washington, D.C., lost control of it to the Catholic Church. They looked more respectable and they did a really good campaign, but also because suddenly there was federal funding. Now, we had been making these things work by raising money on a constant basis. But suddenly there was money available from the government, and they could write a proposal, and they had an institution that looked really good and socially respectable, much more so than our lesbian, fly-by-night camp that put the thing in place in the first place, and they took it over. The same thing happened with a lot of the rape crisis stuff. So a lot of things that we developed, we — feminist activists — created, got taken over by much more conservative, socially acceptable, heterosexual organizations. It was just so relentless. Pretty depressing.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and then it became the service industry not a social change movement.

ALLISON: Exactly. And there was this constant struggle about whether it was radical or whether it was reform.

ALLISON: Some of that is coded — I always thought — was a coded argument, because the real argument is — (chuckles) — the real argument was, who was career making and who was trying to change the world? And, you know, both can happen at the same time. A lot of these
organizations became conservative because people were career making and they couldn’t risk their careers, so they had to keep their respectability quotient. So they couldn’t do real radical stuff. It’s like, right back to the waitress union. You know, they’ll let you do a whole lot of things that look radical, but when you actually begin to deal with genuine economic issues, they’ll shut you right down. Or you’ll suddenly be in danger in ways you haven’t been before, which is some of what happened in the rape crisis and shelter movement in D.C.

At the same time, there was a rape crisis center that survived in D.C., that was radical and that fought tooth and nail for that funding, and actually got a lot of it, and I worked with them for a while too.

But it got to be more and more — because I was visiting friends all over the South. In every city, that fight was going on, and in many cities, the more conservative group would take over what a radical group had put in place and pretty much cut a lot of the services and change the nature of what the original intention had been, so it became far less radical. Now on some basic level, as long as the shelter services are being provided, I still think a good thing has been accomplished.

ANDERSON: Right. It’s still a success.

ALLISON: Right. But if you make a shelter in which you can’t have any lesbians, and if you make a shelter in which it’s dangerous for women to actually genuinely talk about what happened in the home because it’s a Catholic nun running the group, who has a psychology degree and is going to tell you, you need to check yourself into a service center — good God, that’s a whole different thing than what we had been putting in place before. It got tricky.

ANDERSON: So were you starting to wonder where your home in the women’s movement was at this point?

ALLISON: No.

ANDERSON: What were you feeling about feminism and your place in the movement?

ALLISON: I didn’t actually have that break until Barnard.

ANDERSON: Okay.

ALLISON: That’s when it really broke. There would be breaks around class and breaks around lesbianism, but they would be small breaks, and I could always think that, really, the true spirit of feminism is not this, and I’d just take a deep breath and let it go. Or, you know, shift and go do something that seemed to be more meaningful and purposeful. And write. Write more and more, write more stories than essays, because story could be more complicated than essay. When writing political
theory, you always have to reduce and simplify. But you can make stories deeply complicated. It doesn’t make sense, life, you know?

But I kept thinking that there was a heart of feminism, there was a purpose, and that we were, in fact, accomplishing a great many purposes. Losing some battles, or having, like, two steps forward, one step back. It seemed to me I was in it for the long haul.

A lot of the women that I worked with, we kept making compromises and still trying to do radical change, and sometimes you have to make nice.

ANDERSON: Why did you move north to Brooklyn? What prompted that decision?

ALLISON: Well, when the bank account got emptied. I decided to go back to school. And some of it was, I don’t know enough. But also, it was getting harder and harder to make a living and manage.

So I went to Brooklyn with Morgan, and signed up at the New School. I was going to get my degree in anthropology, and then I thought, Okay, I’ll be a professor. I’ll just join with all these others and I’ll do some career stuff, and I’ll begin to take my life seriously, because clearly, the lesbian collective is not going to take care of me in my old age, and I’ll get a job. I always had a job, but this time I’m like, I’m going to get a real job instead of the short term.

And so I went to the New School in anthropology, but I did exactly what I always do. We moved to Brooklyn, I signed up at the New School. I had to get a job, saw an old girlfriend, went to apply for the job at Poets & Writers, and, at the same time, started going to readings and magazine meetings. So when I went to New York, there was an S/M group, which was primarily heterosexual, and I went to some of their meetings and tried to find — But there were feminists in that group, but they were not my kind of feminists.

At the same time, I had started at the New School, so I thought, All right, how shall I actually figure this out? (laughs) So I went in the back of the [Village] Voice and found the ads for female dominants, made some phone calls, and went in as an anthropologist to interview female dominants. I’m like, Okay, I am going to get realistic about this. If I am going to continue being sexually attracted to this, I’ve got to actually get realistic.

And I did it first as an anthropologist, but mostly as a feminist, and in fact wound up doing an ethnography of working-class women who became female dominants, because those were the ones that would talk to me more easily. There were some transgender people back then, but they wouldn’t talk to me because I looked too much like a — what I was, and I dated a couple of them, which was complicated and interesting and educational.

Then it was like, Okay — started a group and started a discussion group and, really, I think the first — I wrote the ad. I was dating this one women, two — I was dating a couple, a butch-femme couple.
ANDERSON: Wow.

ALLISON: Yeah. Great sex, complicated emotional life. We decided to start a discussion group, so we put flyers in the bathrooms in the women’s bars and we said, A discussion group on politically incorrect sex, which was our coded way. Now, I’m used to the whole concept of using coded words and trying to pull in the people you want, but doing it as — and the concept of using politically incorrect sex, and, really, what we were looking for was S/M, butch-femme — but we pulled in a lot broader than that using that phrase. A lot of the early meetings were fascinating, because there were all these people talking about sexual fetish and perversity, and I was just like, Whoa, I never even thought of that.

ANDERSON: Let me try.

ALLISON: Yeah. And I had the anthropologist fascination with, You can come that way? Wow. But I was also broke and desperate for cash, so I started working at Poets & Writers, but I also started working as a coat-check girl at a leather bar, a heterosexual leather bar down in the Meatpacking District. (laughs)

ANDERSON: A double life.

ALLISON: I got the job by one of the women I interviewed, and she says, “You know, you can make some money; it’s all off the books.” So yeah, double life.

So once again, I actually had, like, three levels of a life. I had my life as a feminist editor at Conditions and writing stories. I had my life at the New School, which is an anthropology life. And then I had this other nefarious life, which was intimately connected, and some of the same people overlapped, but many of the people who overlapped were completely closeted in those strata. I remember once throwing a Thanksgiving Day party and inviting everybody from all my three lives. Fortunately, I had a big fucking apartment, because they did not speak to each other. People formed a little huddled group and looked suspiciously at each other, and they would kind of recognize each other. It was made clear to me that I should never do that again.

It created entirely too much dissonance, but it also saved my life, because I had reached the point where I really — (sighs) My sisters and I, we joke about it. It’s not a joke, it’s just — Our joke is, when we go to a party and there’s an evil fucking motherfucker in the corner, a drunk, nasty motherfucker — if it’s a man, my sisters are over there flirting him up, and if it’s a woman, I’m there.

At a certain point, it just became obvious to me that the women I was falling in love with — one of them was going to kill me, and that I had to do something about it, but I couldn’t figure out anything. I was a feminist. I understood incest. I understood the conditioning of
violence. I understood self-hatred. I understood a whole bunch of things. It never changed anything. I’m like, All right, what is really going on here? Why? And especially after I started interviewing people about fetish and all of that eroticization. I was like, Okay, what if I organized my sex life the way I organized my political life? Could we really make this a little safer and saner?

And that was the whole premise of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, which is, what if we really just tried to make it a little safer and saner? Some of it was just about getting information. “How Not to Get Killed” was one of our early workshops. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Did you really call it that?

ALLISON: I did. It got a pretty good response, because it was a joke and people could laugh, but then they could talk about, But she nearly killed me, or, I wound up in the hospital, or, you know. God. And seeing people who have destroyed or deformed their lives completely, unnecessarily. And being forced to be more radical by the nature of the people who showed up.

There was a lot of fighting when we started the Lesbian Sex Mafia. There were people who wanted it just to be a lesbian group, and I’m like, Well, no, actually, I don’t think that’s going to work, because I don’t think that’s the essential issue we’re going to talk about.

And then there were, oh, the whole — some of the women I met in the kinky community in New York were — I met some Olympic athletes who were pre-op transsexuals. They weren’t really. They were incredibly butch dykes who wanted incredibly femme lovers, but they couldn’t get what they wanted, and so they were going to have sex-change surgery in order to get what they wanted, and I was what they wanted. Well, actually, a higher-femme version of me was what they wanted. They didn’t want to be men. They didn’t have — I’ve met transgender people who really did have gender issues, but these were just people who wanted the kind of loving sexual relationship they wanted. They couldn’t get it any other way and were going to become men to get it. From the beginning, when we established the Lesbian Sex Mafia and started having open meetings and these people showed up — you took one look around the room, half of them abandoned their plans for surgery, because what they wanted was in the room and was looking back at them, very happy to find them. (sighs)

But the tragedy of meeting people who had deformed their lives or hated themselves simply because lust, to them, was so endangered and so dangerous. It didn’t have to be. You know, a woman whose whole sexual response, who is completely orgasmic if you spank her first, and then if you don’t spank her, it doesn’t ever happen. Doesn’t even want to do anything elaborate or ritualized or even involving any equipment, but, you know? (laughs)

It just seemed to me so unjust, so ridiculous, and a profoundly feminist issue. Because I do not know how desire is conditioned, and
I’m willing to discuss the possibility that most of my masochistic desires originated in being beaten as a four-year-old. I can see that, but, you know, I was beaten as a four-year-old, it’s there, it’s in place, and nothing I have done in life has ever removed it, except made me asexual, and I don’t think that’s a happy solution. So I’m perfectly willing to have all those discussions, but I am not willing to live a life in which there is no sexual desire and that there is no connection, especially since, if you have a little bit of a sense of humor and a little bit of pragmatism, it’s not that complicated. It can be made complicated.

And that was the most dangerous thing we did. But from very small beginnings, just trying to have these discussion groups, enormous things come, and that little group of half a dozen people, in a couple of years, was hundreds of people and an organization, and had had to have huge, complicated fights, because, in fact, I wasn’t going to compromise and I started the damn thing. I’m like, You know, I’m not saying no to anybody. All perverts welcome. And I don’t care if you used to be a boy and now you’re a girl. I don’t care about any of that shit. I simply want us to organize for our own survival.

It was very, very powerful feminist action, and it became troublesome because there were a lot of feminist groups that disapproved entirely. There were a lot of moralist feminists, and the antiporn people reacted to us with such horror.

ANDERSON: And we’ll save the whole violence story for the next tape, because we’ve only got a couple of minutes left. So I don’t want to get into Barnard yet.

ALLISON: The funny thing was, all that time I was working at Conditions, and the essential difference — I had gotten older, I had made some decisions. I stopped being closeted, so that everyone who worked with me or knew me in the — And I started publishing stories and working as an editor and writing for the Voice. I was simply very matter-of-fact about who I was and that I was this kinky pervert. And I used queer and kinky and pervert because I didn’t want to go into the details of what it is I do in bed, because mostly that’s tedious. It’s like talking to your kid about sex. I don’t want to talk to you about what I do in bed. I simply want you to know that, yes, exactly, I am that person you are uncomfortable with and I’m a feminist.

Being out was like — it was like coming out as a lesbian. It was just being. Okay, I’m going to stop hiding. It meant, immediately, that when I did get in a relationship with a woman who had turned out to be a drug addict — (laughs) I thought I had done so well, but no, she was sneaking in the bathroom to do heroin — I could say, Woops! And call somebody. And they could come, and when she tried to keep me in the apartment, get help.

But being out and being matter-of-fact and having resources made a huge difference. It had worked for me as a lesbian; it worked
for me as a pervert. And most of the women that I knew, feminist
women who were not — I would not have called them perverts. Maybe
they were a little butch-femme, most lesbians are on some level —
really didn’t have a big issue with it. I mean, they were curious and
they had that whole voyeuristic curiosity and wanted to know more —
Ooh, you really do that? Can I see your toy bag? — and all that shit.
But understood it as a feminist issue. It meant they could stop wasting a
lot of energy and a lot of time, and continuing to be a dogged, obsessive
activist and do so many meetings, so many projects.

ANDERSON: So did telling the truth about it, coming out like that about your sexual
desire, then allow for more safety for you?

ALLISON: In many ways, yeah. It created some other dangers, yeah. I got
blackmailed. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Right. But if you were, then, in a dangerous situation, you had
resources.

ALLISON: Oh yes, absolutely. Also, you’d meet someone at a bar, you’re
attracted, and you can check in. That was one of the things that we did,
was that we established, Yes, Margaret dated her. You don’t want to
date her, this is what she really does. And, you know, That one is crazy,
and, you know, just sharing information. A lot of the stuff, it’s available
online now. We had to create resources, phone trees, and meetings.
And a newsletter. We’d always done newsletters. Every goddamn
organization has a newsletter.

ANDERSON: So what did a sex party look like? Describe a typical sex party, if there
is one.

ALLISON: Actually, there is. Or there was. I don’t know anymore, because I got
older and I don’t have any interest.

First, you have to have a safe place to hold it, so somebody has
to sponsor it. That means there has to be a location, either a house or —
well, the first ones we did were in one of the leather bars, one night a
week in one of the leather bars in the Meatpacking District. Then you
have to have people who are doing the work, which means people at the
door. You have to have people who are going to be safety people, on
many levels. One, just the sheer safety of sexual play, which in the
pervert community is complicated. People bring in a lot of equipment,
and some of them don’t know how to use it. So you have to have
people who know how to actually be assisting in that equipment. But
also, people who can be present when people get drunk and lovers have
fights. People show up who show up simply to confront or to be
voyeurs. Now there’s a certain kind of voyeurism that we honored,
because it’s a perversion, and we honored all perversions. But there are
other kinds of that that are destructive and problematic.
Basically, it was about inventing a manners for how to have sex in public. The gay men’s community has that traditionally, on some levels, but the lesbian community didn’t.

ANDERSON: And these parties were only for lesbians or self-identified lesbians.

ALLISON: Self-defining lesbians. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So no (inaudible).

ALLISON: It was fun, and the real fun was working the door. We had one woman who wanted to check if they were packing, and I’m like, You know, we don’t care. You just want to touch their pussies. No, we’re not going to do that, that’s not part of your job. Your job is to take their five dollars and make sure that they know what’s coming, and warn them about what they’re stepping into. Because some people would come curious, and there’s going to be someone on the bar actually having sex in front of you. You’re going to have a shocking experience if you’re not ready for this.

That was a fascinating and wonderful thing. And we were following the model of other communities who had already done it, so some of that was — I had gone out to San Francisco and gone to one of the Outcast events, and we modeled what they had done, with a New York variation, because we had a sub-basement leather bar. The only man in was the bartender, and he was having a great time. He was, like, an honorary lesbian for the course of it.

And we made connections with the gay men’s leather men’s community which, at least during the scandalous times when we were all being attacked, was very supportive. I actually got made an honorary leather man at some point and made a member. But then, later on, because we were still feminists and still fighting feminist issues, I got kicked out because they didn’t approve of some of my feminist activism. I take pride in both those events. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So how did you make the sex parties feminist, or how would you –

ALLISON: What’s feminist about a sex party?

ANDERSON: Yeah. How would you monitor that?

ALLISON: Oh goodness. One is that — My ideology, my conviction, is to honor all perversion, which means, you know, the girls that want to come and just watch get just as much respect as the ones who want to put on a show. A lot of people who go to parties — it’s about exhibitionism and honoring that, but trying to make it so that no one was being harassed or forced to do stuff they didn’t want to do. That gets very complicated.

And to a certain extent, you’ve got to know the people and know what’s going on. It can pretty easily step over into being — what is it?
— matronizing. (laughs) “I don’t know that she really wants to be tied up in that way, Jean. You’re just talking her into doing this because there are all these people watching and you’re showing off, and she looks decidedly uncomfortable in a way she doesn’t enjoy.” You know, having to be that person is a pain in the ass.

ANDERSON: That was your job?

ALLISON: That was one of my jobs.

ANDERSON: To monitor that.

ALLISON: We had different people who did it. We had dungeon masters or party monitors who would act that way. It’s really profoundly complicated to have a feminist sex party. (laughs)

Some of it is simple. You make sure there’s food, you watch the consumption of liquor. You make sure there are no drugs, because then you get busted. You make sure there are no people underage, because then you get busted. You make sure nobody’s got a camera, because then people can get blackmailed. And you watched — you have certain rules for how parties proceed, which means you can — There are people who have the right, at any point, to step up and say, You really want this, honey? And intervene, but do it in a graceful manner. I brought Southern manners to sex parties in New York.

Now there was also, remember, a much larger heterosexual pervert community that had all these other parties, and we borrowed some of their systems. But we put what we thought was a profoundly feminist spin on it. I must say, they were enormously popular for a while.

ANDERSON: What years would you say?

ALLISON: Oh goodness, so — ’81. I left in ’87. And they’re still going on. They are still going on, but they’re no longer — They’re sponsored by different organizations, and they moved more into people’s homes, people who had the capacity for bringing in 80 people and letting them have sex all over the house.

It was interesting. When I moved to San Francisco, I went to join the Outcasts, and then joined up with some other people and worked with setting up independent parties, partly because I had a real complicated relationship to prostitution. I have a feminist critique of prostitution at the same time as I have a feminist appreciation of how, in some ways, prostitution can be empowering. Not generally in this culture, because there’s the Mafia and then we’re in a patriarchal society. But, in fact, if there were a feminist model for it, what would it look like? That’s an interesting question.

And I actually do believe, in some ways, I’m a libertarian. I think that people should be allowed to do what they want to do with
their lives. It would be nice if they were fully informed and had a range of choices. And also it would be nice if they were not going to be trapped in a system that was going to dominate their lives or destroy them or lead them to despair, which a lot of pornography and prostitution does. But to have a really complicated approach to it is tricky.

I met women who were doing feminist pornography. Now that’s an interesting concept. As a lesbian, I absolutely understand it, because I’ve written some stories that are essentially just to get people hot and bothered, and I believe in that as a narrative stance and as a choice, but it’s way complicated. There should be unions. (laughs)

I’ve never been easy with any of this stuff. And running parties, feminist parties, was all about providing an alternative. Because there are ways in which suddenly the lesbian community looked to me to be conservative in ways I hadn’t thought about, even as a feminist. I mean, the ideology of serial monogamy is pretty intense, and the fact that I have never been comfortable with it, just as a part of my paradigm. I don’t think that I was non-monogamous as a feminist choice. I think I was non-monogamous because I was an incest survivor and I was afraid of intimacy. I invented an ideology to match my damage and to protect myself.

I think the women’s movement had invented some ideologies out of the same impulse. Now some of those ideologies and some of those theories are profound and really are true and complicated and interesting, but some of them are self-serving. Looking at it and saying, Well, what if all these little baby dykes who are exhibitionists had a place in which they were given a safe environment to do their exhibitionism, instead of doing it, you know, at the bar two blocks from my house on a Saturday night, and doing it in high drama, you know, dyke drama. Dyke drama in costume at a sex party is one thing. It’s really different from being an involuntary participant in it at the local bar on a Friday night.

We honored a lot of dyke drama, (laughs) and made it possible for people to explore some sexual choices in safety, and that’s something we don’t talk about. Because a lot of people have fantasies about their sex lives that are far more extreme than they will ever be capable of acting out on in their life. And they can screw themselves up thinking about the fantasy and never acting it out. Giving them a safe place where they can go play with it, try it out, and see what it really feels like, seemed to me to be a profound feminist act.

I still think it is, and I think that’s one of the virtues of organizing sex parties, or organizing environments in which people can do some of this stuff in a place where they’re not going to be trapped; in a place where they’re not going to be endangered; in a place where there are people who, if you’re lucky, have a sense of humor and a little information. That might help a whole bunch. I saw it help a whole bunch.
ANDERSON: Did it help make you feel safer sexually?

ALLISON: Yeah, even while letting me play out some of my own foolish fantasies. Well, some things you have to learn the hard way.

ANDERSON: What was the difference between the ones in New York versus the ones in California, in terms of the people who would attend and the kinds of practices? (overlapping dialogue)

ALLISON: This is going sound really — In actual point, the parties in New York were way more diverse in terms of access to communities. Way more women of color, way more working-class women. The lesbian community that I stepped into in San Francisco was profoundly middle class and profoundly conservative, so that even the range of what happened was more doctrinaire. It just didn’t have the wild freedom or experimental nature that what we set up in New York had. But then, they had been doing it a lot longer, so there was a community in place that drew from itself, instead of opening up wide, the way we had done in New York.

I think, in some ways, as time went on, in New York it became more conservative. It’s also, there are a lot of people who will check this stuff out, but then not come back. They’re not exhibitionist and they’re not voyeurs, and they don’t engage in that system. You need to realize that that’s a lot of what happens at sex parties.

ALLISON: I was thinking about Cherríe and Barnard and all that stuff that happened. Boy, when that happened, I wanted so much to grab my people and my friends and have people I could trust. And so there was a way in which — particularly with the women of color that I had been working with in New York. I really wanted them on my side, fighting with me. And their response — not all of them, but some of them — was, This is a white girl’s fight. I don’t want to be pulled into this.

ANDERSON: Cherrie says that too. She says, “Sex wars? That’s a white woman’s issue. It has nothing to do with me.”

ALLISON: She’s wrong about that. (laughs) But at the same time, she’s right about how she got played and pulled in, and that was really hard to confront and see that, in fact. I wanted her to back me and fight it on my terms. It was very hard to look at it from her terms and see that she was getting played, and that she was right to hold back and not step into that — or not step into it in the way we were trying to pull her into it.

Meanwhile, the sex wars issues are present and omnipresent in the black women’s community the way they are in the white women’s community. The sex wars is not just a white issue, although some of the ways we fought it were.
ANDERSON: Yeah. And that historical moment was — that those debates in 1982, ’83 —

ALLISON: The problem is that I was working in groups — Some of the sex war groups that I worked with at the Lesbian Sex Mafia were more integrated than a lot of the white women’s groups that I was working in, because it was — A lot of it was about basic survival and economic issues, which is hard for people to understand when you talk about the sex wars, because they think you’re talking about autonomy of the body and freedom on that level. And we were, but we were also talking about prostitutes’ rights and unionization, and all those economic issues and health issues that got subsumed or just not really talked about as being really intricate to that fight. Because the white woman’s issue is all about, I’m ashamed of my sexuality, which is bullshit. Well, no, it’s not bullshit. It is an issue, but the big issues, like the horrors —

I mean, the hard part was fighting the antiporn people, when porn is such a criminal industry on so many levels, and trying to give women autonomy in a system that even the best autonomy you can get is still in a criminal system, is really tricky. It would be nice if it were simple, but it’s not. It’s human lives.

ANDERSON: When you say tried to pull Cherríe and others into the sex wars stuff or the Barnard stuff, what do you mean by that? How did you try to pull her into that?

ALLISON: Oh, just trying to get people to speak out, because we were being attacked on so many levels that you wanted people to help you and defend you.

ANDERSON: And so you asked for her support in a way that was complicated for her?

ALLISON: Oh yeah. Oh, I think it was unjust, because we were desperate at different times, terribly, terribly desperate. I know people who killed themselves out of that situation, who literally — And a lot of it is because all of a sudden they were perverts again in public.

Aside from the fact that some of the tactics that were used in that infighting between different groups within the women’s movement were almost unbelievably horrific. I mean, it really was the case that someone called my boss to tell him all the details of why I was a sex pervert and why they should fire me, and that’s, like, you just didn’t — I did not imagine that that was where it would go. I mean, that they would try to get funding canceled at Barnard, that made sense to me. I’d seen that often enough. But that they would go after individual people in that red-baiting way that I took out of the McCarthy era and anticommunist stuff. But that was it: we were monsters, and anything was justified. Or the woman who set fire —

There was a benefit in lower Manhattan for a Feminists Against Censorship group. And one of the women from Women Against
Pornography, with her girlfriend, piled trash up against the door that went up to the loft where the benefit was taking place, and set fire to it. Now, on one level, she was protesting, and she had all this justification in her mind. Nonetheless, she could have burned 400 people to death. And if people hadn’t come down and kicked the fire out and called the cops — which is always hard for a feminist to do. But that she felt completely justified and that, in her mind, if those 400 people had burned up, that was good. Those were 400 people who should die. And that that level of hatred and violence was an everyday thing for about a year — it was that level of intensity.

So yes, we were desperate. And, Cherríe, why aren’t you speaking out and defending me? And she was like, This is your fight. She was right, yes, but meanwhile, I was hysterical. It was a bad time. None of us behaved as well as we had hoped we would.

ANDERSON: What are your regrets around it? How do you wish you behaved differently?

ALLISON: I wish I hadn’t fallen apart quite so badly. That’s the hard part to — Because I did. Some other stuff — My mother got cancer. Barnard happened in the spring, and a month later my mother was diagnosed with a reoccurrence of cancer. And at the same time, while I was trying not to lose my job, a woman I was lovers with had a horrific accident and broke her neck.

So it was, like, boom, boom, boom, and by — that was all April. By June, I was a basket case, and I was barely functional, so that there was just stuff I had failed to do. I just didn’t have the resources. I could, you know, try to help Jo with her broken neck, which I did very badly, try to support my mother, which I did very badly, and try not to lose my job and collapse completely. I did everything badly for months and months and months, just barely managing to function. I regret that enormously.

ANDERSON: But you survived.

ALLISON: I came out the other side broken and almost — yeah, broken, broken. I lost a lot of my manufactured face. (laughs) In the long run, it pushed me to realizations and work that I needed to do, that I would have hesitated to do because it was just so painful. It pushed me back into my family, it changed my writing absolutely, and it made me rethink what it was I thought feminism was about and what my life was about.

That also coincided with when I was supposed to be completing my master’s in anthropology, and I just walked away from it.

ANDERSON: At the New School.

ALLISON: Yeah. I walked away from a lot of stuff. The things that I held on to I’ve held on to, in some cases, out of sheer stubbornness, like continuing
to call myself a feminist; or continuing to try to work with *Conditions* and trying not to collapse absolutely; and hanging on to everything I possibly could. But I lost a lot.

I lost a lot of friends, for my reasons and theirs, just because I was barely able to — Even people who were trying to be present — and it’s hard for people to be present when you’re suddenly a public pervert. Remember, they picketed that Barnard sex conference [“The Feminist and the Scholar IX”] with our names on flyers and posters. There were, like, six of us. And all of a sudden, everything I have done for 20 years has been redefined in their terms, and the terms were very clear. I was a shill for the pornographers, I was a pornographer. Everything that I had ever written about sexual deviance and incest was suddenly redefined as a pornographic, monstrous text. When I was really trying to sort stuff out about incest and sex and family, it was just horrific, and I had to start fighting to say, “No, that’s not what I’m doing. This is how you see what I’m doing, and you know, there’s this little piece of me that can kind of see how you see what I’m doing, but you’re wrong.” And then having to fight it on such a level.

Also, a lot of it was in terms — It was like fighting with psychiatrists who were constantly telling you that you were crazy and sick. I mean, on one level, I can fight people who do the Christian thing — You’re a monster, you’re an evil person because you’re a dyke, and all this stuff — because I’ve been fighting it since childhood. But to be told that you’re crazy. And I’ve always kind of suspected I was crazy. You know, I’m of that age. And then having to defend against people who should, on some level, speak your language and have your — you know, we should have had a common language, but suddenly we didn’t, and suddenly there were these people who literally wanted me to die, and who would have done anything to kill me or to kill my soul. It was bad. There’s no other word.

**ANDERSON:** Were you shocked by that explosion at Barnard?

**ALLISON:** Yeah.

**ANDERSON:** I know you were on the planning committee of it, so –

**ALLISON:** But barely. I was so busy and doing so much other stuff.

**ANDERSON:** But in the planning of it, and in the Lesbian Sex Mafia for the two years preceding the conference, did you have inklings that this was coming?

**ALLISON:** Oh, we knew that they hated us, and we knew that there was this fight, but I thought this was a philosophical political disagreement that we would work through.

**ANDERSON:** And it was an academic conference. I mean, you thought it would stay pretty sort of contained –
ALLISON: Yes, and there’s academic conferences and then there are conferences that are in the real world, and so I didn’t pay much — I mean, I paid attention and it was substantial, and I knew that out of it would come books and papers and theory. But books and papers and theory have long-term and slow effects. It’s not immediate.

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: Immediate — getting beaten up on the street, losing your job, you know, have your lover leave town, have people call you in the middle of the night with a knife to their throat and drinking poison and all kinds of horrific things. All that — I didn’t put those things together, and I should have, because I know — you know, I have a decent education. I know about sex panics, and I know, in fact, the history of sex panics in this country, and that’s what it was on some levels.

And then it was a struggle for — what is it she called it? For the soul of feminism. But it was. And I disdained that at first, but it was. It was a struggle for the soul of feminism. From my point of view, the redefinition of feminism that was going on out of the sex wars was a really conservative response to the open inquiry of that committee at Barnard. And I should have noticed how afraid and upset they were, but I didn’t go to many of the meetings, bottom line. I trusted the people who were putting it together. But I trusted on a level that, It’s an academic conference, they’ll raise lots of issues, there will be open discussion. These were people who did not want these issues raised; who did not want any legitimate attention given to even discussing the complexities of why people go into prostitution, or how, in fact, you can derive any sense of freedom from pornography. But if you’re a lesbian of my age, you know that huge sections of your life are defined as pornographic. You can go back to Elana Dykewomon in the open of Riverfinger Women: “My life is a pornographic text.” But they did not even want that level of discussion, and they felt as if their feminism was being stolen. So the fight became incredibly vicious on so many levels, so many levels.

The philosophical struggle goes on to this day and probably always will. I’ve gotten to the point where I think it always will, because there are deeply conservative strands within feminism that make more sense to me now that I’m older. (laughs) When you’re young it doesn’t make sense. It’s not so easy to imagine giving up so much, but the whole concept of a postfeminist sexuality — did you ever hear that?

ANDERSON: Yes. I teach college.

ALLISON: Oh, man.

ANDERSON: I’m baffled, and they look at me like I’m a dinosaur, but yes, I hear it.
ALLISON: That they could imagine that you’d be willing to basically not — to become a machine until the revolution. A revolution that always seems to be being pushed further into the future. I mean, that sounds to me like 50s American, If you try really hard, you can have a vaginal orgasm. Well, fuck you, I’ve never managed, and I don’t believe in it. I don’t believe in a postfeminist sexuality, and I’m not willing to create an ideology that destroys so many people.

ANDERSON: Did those debates and then that vilification of you — did that have any impact on your own sense of your sexuality?

ALLISON: It stopped it. I became a stone femme. It’s like, Roll over, honey, and I’ll fuck you, but you’re not touching me. The whole body became a war zone, returned to being a level of war zone that I hadn’t known since I was a teenager. Everything stopped, everything stopped. I think, in some ways, a lot of us did break down. My response, over the course of that summer, was to write the poems that became The Women Who Hate Me, which was a way of trying to work through it. Then, over the next six months, when people began to organize, a lot of defensive organizing went on — had to, had to.

ANDERSON: And you got involved with FACT [Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce].

ALLISON: Yeah. But you did the interview with Amber [Hollibaugh], right?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: So you know some of the stuff that went on.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but tell me your piece of it. First of all, how did you find the energy, then, with this brokenness, this retraumatization, and all of that?

ALLISON: You need to remember that most of us — what I think of as the early feminists — worked at a level that I still find difficult to explain to people. We really were in the habit of working at a level that most human beings don’t. Like I said, if you can go read the histories of the Russian Revolution and see what revolutionaries do, that you’d get very little sleep and you run on coffee. I think for eight years in New York, I was basically doing uppers to move, and only slept when I would drink whiskey to pass out, because I was just running at such a level. You’re running at such a level and you hit a wall. That’s essentially what happened. Everything stops. And then you’ve got to start moving again.

So there was a way in which — I think of the secondary-level people. People whose names were not printed and for whom, in some ways, it was a philosophical fight, at a little distance. Now they did
really well, they did fine. And, in fact, they are the people who I think of, who really put FACT in motion and a lot of the resistance in motion, and who tried to save the conference at Barnard, which was destroyed by that. They have a different version of it, that’s happening now, but a lot of what was in place is gone.

And a lot of them were academics, and they were very good at organizing in their defense, but they were not the first line of target, so they had the time and energy. I think, bluntly, for about three or four months, they were the ones who did the real defensive work while the rest of us were, like, trying not to get fired.

ANDERSON: Sort of the Lisa Duggan type. Is that who you’re thinking about?

ALLISON: Yeah. And then, of course, there was a wave that hit them, because they got targeted personally also in the second wave. So there’s a lot of, you know — And a lot of them, in academic terms, suffered more damage in the long run, because those of us who became targets had to organize for our own defense, and other people organized in our defense. So in some ways we got some support, but it took months. But in the secondary wave, who got hit got hit in that subtle area of career making, where they got some serious long-term damage. So people like Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, who are friends of mine, or Carol Vance, who did a lot of the committee work, really took a lot of damage in terms of jobs, tenure, getting their publications accepted.

For a while the impact was — it was day by day, whether people were managing or not; whether they were keeping their jobs; whether they were getting their stuff published; whether, in fact, they were being — I was disinvited from a shitload of things, but even the second wave got disinvited or delegitimized. And watching that happen was — Bluntly, for a while there I was thrilled to see it, just because, at least initially, there were a lot of people who were like, Well, you should expect this, and, Well, this is part of the process. You know, I’m being rolled over by a boulder, and you’re telling me that this is part of the process and I’m supposed to be patient?

But five or six months later, when some of the committee work started to have some impact and we started to organize somewhat in our own defense, then stuff started to happen where some energy came back. But at the same time, my trust in a lot of those people, particularly academics, was gone, just because they caved on so many levels and backed off on so many levels. They couldn’t persuade me that their horror and fear was justified, because it wasn’t, because they were not taking the damage. In fact, a lot of them got a whole bunch of publishing opportunities, because they were the voice of reason and they could write about this, no less. We couldn’t say anything because we were targets, but that’s very — it was not a — it was a bad time.

When you come through really bad times and out the other side, you can say, Well, I learned this and I learned that and I developed these muscles. But the bad time is a bad time, and some people did not
survive it. You want to talk about people who left feminism? I’m talking about people who left New York. I’m talking about people who had been sober for a long time and went back to substances. The people who disappeared out of their own lives, and at least two women I know who killed themselves because they were real perverts and they knew themselves perverts, and this is the part that always falls out of this discussion.

If you’re a certain age — just about my age or a little older — and you have cobbled together a sense of yourself in resistance to a society that tells you you’re a monster from childhood, you are fragile on levels that are very prone to break again. And some of the people I know who broke during that Barnard scandal were not the immediate targets. They were the people who had cobbled together a sense of self that was dependent on this notion of this community giving them a validation. The validation disappeared, they were monsters again.

The young woman I knew who was a poet — she was those late-night phone calls, and they resumed. And about the end of the summer, she killed herself. And I had another one in the fall. And, you know, you can say, Oh, substance — Oh, she broke up with her girlfriend. Oh, her poems weren’t getting published. But on a real basic level, it was that, All right, I am a monster. That was the thing.

I remember I felt it well. And what I found myself doing was that I simply stopped trusting them on any level, so that people who had been my close friends suddenly were friends, but they were not close. And I had to be really careful and protective, because they just didn’t understand. They couldn’t understand. It was not in their interest to understand, and it was not in their interest to identify.

I’ve seen it since, and it comes every few years, people who define themselves as not queer. It’s really happy to suddenly be not queer. It’s one of the reasons I’m deeply suspicious of the whole marriage shill game, because that — “Let’s redefine you in our terms and say you’re okay. We’ve just decided you’re not sick, you’re not a monster.” If you let them give you your legitimacy, there can be a moment in time where they will take it back. And if you have not created your own sense of legitimacy and you’re out of your own community, you are vulnerable to their redefinition. That’s hegemony. You’ve got to fight it. That’s what we were doing in the Lesbian Sex Mafia that I still think is important and powerful and saved people’s lives.

What is almost unexplainable are the roots in which people define themselves as monsters. Some of the reasons that people think themselves monsters do not seem to me to be — I mean, I’ve met monsters. I grew up with a monster. I grew up with a man who murdered souls just for his own survival, and he was capable of things that I think are monstrous.

But I would meet people, even in the Lesbian Sex Mafia, women who believe themselves monstrous. The woman I met — the Olympic athlete who was going to have a sex change when I met her — she
deeply believed herself a monster because, in fact, on some level, she had always wanted what men had and she had been born in a woman’s body. She didn’t have the whole reference that she was the wrong gender. She just wanted all of that power and authority that she saw in what she defined as male. So she was remaking herself as male, but on the base of, I’m a monster, and all I can do is cobble together an existence in which I will always be a monster but I will look like a human being. You know? And to say to her, “You’re not a monster. This is how you’ve accepted this definition. It’s not true. There is nothing that you want that is monstrous. You want a high-femme girlfriend in heels? And you want to fuck her unconscious? That’s not monstrous. It’s only monstrous in the way that you have been taught to define it.” It was just —

Even as an ideology, even as a theory, even as a philosophy, it’s criminal to do that to people and to let it continue. What I believe was that feminism was about the renunciation of that entire system of labeling some of us monstrous in the service of a machine that eats us alive. And it eats all of us alive. That’s what the fight was for me. But a lot of people didn’t come out the other side, and that disappears out of the narrative a lot. And a lot of people walked away from feminism. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So what sense do you make of the transgender, gender identity, gender/queer direction that so many groups have gone, like the Lesbian Sex Mafia? Where does that sit with you in terms of your history?

ALLISON: It’s not simple, not simple at all. One of the reasons that we were a problematic lesbian feminist organization in New York was that we had a policy that transgender people, as long as you self-defined as a lesbian, you could be a part of the Lesbian Sex Mafia. We didn’t care if you started out as a — we cared. We were curious. We cared if you had started out as a man. And that was profoundly radical when we started the Lesbian Sex Mafia. And a huge fight. And it was a fight even within our own community. There was a huge fight about transgender issues. So we started off on that position, and that position was powerful. And when the community shifted and began to fight that issue, we already had our feminist take on it. Even after I left the Sex Mafia, that take pretty much held.

But some of the fighting about gender back then actually went back to some of the fighting about [Alfred] Kinsey and the whole definition of what was a feminist issue and what was sexual freedom, and what was conservative and retrograde and destructive. And that fight has been going on since the turn of the century — the last century, the 1900s. Go back to Janice Raymond and her definition. On that, we were all pretty clear, and we thought that there was a legitimate and recognized feminist position.

But it is complicated because, in fact, when you change gender — female to male — you acquire male authority and power and
privilege. Now, I always thought that was matter-of-fact, and that was a part of feminist ideology, and we could discuss it. But there have become moments in the last 15, 20 years, in which that discussion has become almost impossible to have. Because at different moments, the analysis of gender transgression has been that, if you shift gender — female to male, male to female — there is almost this pretense that there’s no recognition of what really happens in terms of access to power, authority, and safety in this culture. I agree that, if you shift gender in any sense, that you do enter an endangered position, and there’s a lot of real danger in shifting gender. If you’re suddenly defining as male when you’re in a female body, or defining as female in a male body, yeah, you become a pervert. And all the stuff that I know about danger to perverts absolutely comes into play. But there is still a feminist analysis of acquiring power and legitimacy in this culture that sometimes falls out of the gender discussion, and has fallen out at different moments. But then there is just fashion. And then there is just what’s hot now.

ANDERSON: Do you think that’s what it is?

ALLISON: No, but I think that’s one of the elements that plays into it. On the level of, it suddenly became more sexy and transgressive to be a gender-challenging person, a transgender person, than to be a dyke. I saw that happen in San Francisco. And that has an impact on the young in a way that, what’s sexy and hot at the moment is what they’re going to move toward. Which meant, in some ways, that all of a sudden, people were not defining as dykes, and not defining as lesbians, and profoundly not defining as butches. When you are a femme watching this happen, there’s something really sad.

ANDERSON: There go our women.

ALLISON: Well, and there go — You know, my analysis of a lot of transgender stuff was based on those women I met in New York, the athletes who wanted to be men, who, when you said, “You can have all this stuff but don’t have to become a man,” they were suddenly very happy. Or at least less endangered, not happy.

Watching all the ways that it has moved through our community in the last 20 years is fascinating to me. There are fewer people who identify as lesbians in a very profound way. In a way, it’s almost as if, by making it safer to be gender transgressive, we have legitimized heterosexuality on some level. It’s very problematic, very dangerous, and very complicated to talk about, because, at the same time, you still have to recognize that people who are moving their gender are moving into dangerous territory. And you have to recognize it and give that legitimacy at the same time that you say, “But as you complete your transgression, you’re going to move into a power position in this society. You’re going to have access and privilege that you need to
recognize and acknowledge.” I don’t find that acknowledgment happening much.

ANDERSON: No, nor the critique of gender that feminists articulated 30 years ago. So much of it seems –

ALLISON: It’s funny. It’s almost as if we say, Oh yeah, we know all that, but let’s talk about — Which means they don’t know all that, or they’re not really –

ANDERSON: There’s a consumption of a masculinity that’s very retrograde.

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah. And let’s be very clear. I have always been a pragmatic feminist on the level that I’m more interested in how, in fact, people are surviving day to day than I am in theory. Theory is all very well and good, but I want to know how people are staying alive on the street. What I saw happening — because the constant of my life for the last — oh, dear — at least 35 years, has been the antiviolence movement and the shelter movement, because I needed it so desperately as a child. And I have always worked there because I know things about family violence, rape, and incest that are vital and important, and I can just — And because it’s easier. I’m old. I can stand up and talk about it the way a lot of the people who have just come out of it can’t yet talk about it. Therefore, it is my responsibility to do so. In that area, this is deeply complicated, deeply complicated. Because a lot of the people that I knew who shifted gender in San Francisco 20 years ago and started taking testosterone, became — or at least had periods in which they were — emotionally volatile and violent in their personal relationships. That pushed a lot of people, a lot of lesbians, into the shelter movement, who had never imagined that they would be being beaten up by their girlfriend. But their girlfriend has been shooting up testosterone for six weeks and is having hot flashes and manic episodes. We had so little information about how that was going to impact.

And then that’s the other thing that’s really painful and really difficult, which is that there is a critique of butch-femme that is absolutely accurate, and it is a power relationship. And what I want to do in bed is not what I want to do in my daily life. You know, you can push me around in bed and we can be really happy. But you start pushing me around on a day-to-day and making assumptions about what my role is because I’m femme, I’m going to fight you tooth and nail. That’s a feminist struggle, always has been.

If we are defending our right to have legitimacy for butch-femme relationships without acknowledging the complications of those relationships, we’re creating trouble. We have created a lot of trouble, because a lot of the women that I knew who were in butch-femme relationships that began in gender shifts, a lot of times butch lesbians became some form of not just not men, but a lot of times became
faggots, at least in San Francisco. But really prone to painful, complicated, horrific episodes. It got very scary.

It does seem to me that there is also something that happens. That when you do a gender shift, you don’t become a man. A woman doesn’t become a man. You become a gender outlaw. I think, actually, all of Kate Bornstein’s work on that is wise and informed and deeply complicated. But a lot of times, when people talk about it, the complications drop away, and a lot of times people are defending their own lives. Some of that can get pretty simple and dangerous.

ANDERSON: I think that’s happened around butch-femme.

ALLISON: A series of things like that. But then, for a Southern writer to move to New York, it’s almost very, very magical. I mean, I remember getting the little guidebook, the literary guide to New York, and going to see the house where Auden had lived and where Tennessee Williams had been. They lived with the stripper — I’ve forgotten her name — Gypsy Rose Lee, in that big old house. And going to the Lower East Side and going to readings and, oh man.

And then going to the New School and studying anthropology. It was like I had been living on what was essentially a kibbutz or a communist retreat for all those years. And working at a pace in which I never had any personal time, and got very little of my personal writing done in D.C. and Tallahassee, doing so much work for the revolution, and writing a kind of writing that was not what I was gifted at. I don’t write good theory. My mind doesn’t work like that.

ANDERSON: You’re not polemical.

ALLISON: No, and I find it really tedious, and my sense of humor is perverse enough that it gets in the way. Going back to writing stories and poetry was so luxurious, and, at the same time, induced so much guilt, because it was self-indulgent. I mean, there are ways in which I had been trained to be a revolutionary, a foot soldier for the revolution. I was serious. So when I was invited to join Conditions, which was a wonderful lesbian literary magazine with a very strong political analysis, that was marvelous. It was like, Oh, I can do both. I can do this writing that I’m just beginning to get a handle on, and work with great editors and do what I believe in.

And that’s the thing: do what I believe in. Because more and more, I had thought deeper and more deeply about the fact that, how do people genuinely change? How do cultures genuinely change? There’s an enormous amount of stuff that you change through law, and then there is an enormous amount of stuff that you change through education. There were ways in which always working on feminist publications, which I had done consistently for a decade, was about education, and to a certain extent about advancing an analysis, although that was not my gift. But this was just — all of a sudden the doors opened, and I could
think more freely about things that I avoided thinking about, or letting myself think too closely about.

Some of it was personal, about relationships, because when your collective breaks up, that meant that the protective system of being in a collective relationship broke up. It meant I could be — I could get myself in trouble. I could get in real relationships with women, and since I was always attracted to difficult butch women, that meant difficult butch-femme relationships. But it just opened up so much. It was like I got drunk on freedom for a good year.

And stepping into the New School and anthropology — oy vey. (laughs) I love anthropology. I actually love the New School. I love the people that I met there. I love Rayna Rapp and Shirley Lindenbaum and, oh my God, Stanley Diamond. And I loved that work, and all the reading and the study. But meanwhile, especially with a lot of the younger professors, I was “that lesbian feminist.” I can remember being in classes and being, Well, what’s the feminist position on this? And having to articulate — That was a pain in the ass. But it was so different from what I had been doing. It was still very, very freeing.

*Conditions* was the best of it. There were just wonderful, extraordinary women, and there were a lot of shared assumptions and shared understanding of what we were about and what the purpose of such a publication was. I didn’t have to fight as I had had to fight at *Quest* and *Amazing Grace*, and all the other publications I’d ever worked with, because *Conditions* had the same understanding about how the world changes. The world changes through story. The world changes through personal interaction. Education, yes, but it becomes more powerful and more effective if you make those personal connections, and there’s nothing more personal than story.

I understand so much more about the world, growing up on James Baldwin and Flannery O’Connor. If I had not had them, I’m scared of who I would be. That was such a common assumption at *Conditions*. We wanted to publish story that would change the world. Lesbian story, working-class story, women of color story. And do it in a way that honored the writers, which meant editing and taking it all seriously. In a lot of feminist publications, that whole concept was embattled.

And then I made friends, with great difficulty, (laughs) because we were all serious politicals. You’ve got to keep that in mind. So I can remember the first meeting, at which I can’t even remember all the names of the women who joined at the same time I did, but Cheryl Clarke and Jewelle Gomez, because we became very close friends, but not in the beginning. In the beginning, when we were sitting at this meeting and it was the previous editors — Irena Klepfisz and Jan Clausen and Elly Bulkin, really amazing people. They bring us all in and, We have picked you, to invite you to join the collective, and we want you to work together, and we want to set this system up.

But they were transitioning. All those people actually wanted to retire as editors and put a new editorial board in place, which was
marvelous and wise and feminist of them. They put together a mixed bunch of people who were not going to get along, and we had to work it out. I mean, I was suddenly working with Yankee black women, and they looked at me like, Who is this cracker? And I’m like, Ooh, they’re going to eat me alive. And, pretty much, some of that happened. It was a hard transition to get to know each other, learn to trust each other. But we learned it doing the work and discovering that we all loved the work and took the work entirely seriously.

Some of it was very, very painful. One of the people who joined the collective had a secret drug problem that became awful. And we all loved her. And that struggle got awful and did not end well. That also pushed us into becoming friends.

And then, oddly enough, we were all butch-femme, but in different contexts. Butch-femme in the black community — much more stringent than some of what I had come out of in my lackadaisical working-class white girl way. But Jewelle and I discovered quickly that we were attracted to problematic, interesting butch girls. Had different sexuality and different fetishes, but we liked them problematic, difficult butch girls. I would see who she was attracted to, and I’m like, Ooh, this is going to be bad; but it’s going to be fun to watch. And she could do the same thing with me, and we became friends. Sometimes also about the work, because I loved the poetry she was writing, and I could share work with Jewelle, and we became much closer. It was hard for me to become close with Cheryl, she was so butch and did a very different kind of work.

It was very rich, so that when trouble started happening — and trouble started happening way before Barnard, because I was in a phase in which there was all this freedom, and I was confrontive. Jewelle was always supportive and always fully present in my life, and has been to this day. So that when the blowups happened, and it was suddenly expensive to be my friend, she didn’t back up at all, which was wonderful. It made a huge difference. It made me feel less crazy, and cemented the friendship on many levels. She did not feel played, but maybe because we were closer and I was more careful not to play her.

And we pushed each other as writers. Both of us believed in writing as a way to change the world. Both of us believed in pushing ourselves to do the work we were most afraid of. That was great, to have someone pushing me that way. And I made more friends for whom that was the case.

I took a sabbatical, and a friend loaned me a place on Fire Island on the off-season, and I went out to Fire Island. At that point, I had been trying to write what became a story called “Gospel Song,” and which was a section of the novel I was beginning to figure out that I wanted to write, but I never had enough time. I was writing after classes and on the subway and in the middle of the night. But I had three months in that freezing place out on Fire Island, and all of a sudden, what had been 12, 15 pages, became 60 pages. It was the first uninterrupted work time I had ever had.
It changed me completely as a writer — just a door into quiet. You don’t get enough doors into quiet in an activist life. And while I felt deeply guilty, when I came back to New York, I threw myself into a rush of activism. Some of what happened with the Sex Mafia came out of my guilt of having stolen three months to write and pay my dues back, paying back the community by being more of an activist. I established the pattern of stealing that time and going away and writing, and learned to write.

And then finding people to share the work with that were critical. One of the issues in a lot of feminist publishing is you need the right kind of critical at the right time. Tricky, encouraging critical. Critical that takes the work seriously and pushes you to do it better. We don’t get that enough. *Conditions* gave me that. Even though a lot of us were very different writers, the work that came out of it was wonderful.

I remember reading the first draft of *Narratives*, Cheryl’s book. And I think some of my critiques of that were not useful, but I took it completely seriously, and that was useful. And reading *Flamingos and Bears*, Jewelle’s book, and sharing those stories with them that I was writing, and getting that same kind of serious attention that made demands on you. That’s invaluable and profoundly feminist.

The thing we don’t talk about is competition. Some of the unspeakables are career making, which I’ve tried to be matter-of-fact about. Some people in the feminist movement made solid successful careers; they got 401ks in return. But also competition. And as writers, we’re not nice people. We all want to be great. And being great is not simple, sometimes not even possible. We genuinely tried to make each other better, and I think of that as the most profound feminist work a writer can do, is to give back to the other feminist writers, to make demands on each other, demands that honor what’s possible, instead of being destructive. I know how to be destructive; I was raised in the Baptist church. It was wonderful, exhausting, and stimulating, and widened my grasp of what feminism and change were about.

**ANDERSON:** It sounds like you also started to shift in terms of your life perception, as not being a movement soldier. And that would be how you paid your bills and spent all your time, to imagine a life as a writer.

**ALLISON:** Well, and imagining living –

**ANDERSON:** Right.

**ALLISON:** The thing that falls out of a lot of my conversations is I never thought I’d live long. I wasn’t healthy, and I did have a tendency to get injured. But also, the history of my twenties and thirties was watching my aunts die. I’m the oldest living woman in my family, and we had an epidemic of cancer and high blood pressure and diabetes, all the diseases of the working poor in the South. My mother had cancer for 30 years. I always expected to die. My conviction was that I would die either of
cancer — which I just keep an eye out for because I figure it’s coming — or that one of my lovers would kill me, something my mother also was afraid of. Oh God.

So I never thought I’d live long. And so I never planned for it, and I was willing to be a foot soldier. I’m going to die anyway. But there’s a point at which you’re thinking, I’m going to die anyway, maybe I can get this done before I die. I’m going to die anyway, but I’m going to leave this book. I’m going to get this book right. I’m going to get this story right. I’m going to get this poem right. I’m going to do something of use before I check out.

And then, at some point, it suddenly dawned on me that, by comparison to most of the women in my family, I’m astonishingly healthy. That’s tricky, because I know why I’m healthy.

ANDERSON: Survivor’s guilt.

ALLISON: Yeah, survivor’s guilt is a killer. I went to college. Most of my cousins were pregnant at 15.

I just did this talk at the University of Wyoming and read a story that’s really intricate and tricky and complicated and about being in a violent family, a different kind of story. At the end of it, this little boy stands up, and he says, “I know you write out of your family.” And he’s like, How did you not die? Why are you alive? Survivor’s guilt? Big question.

I’m like, All right, I’ll tell you the truth, I am alive because I’m a lesbian. And this is not something this culture understands or honors, but if I had been heterosexual like all my cousins, I’d be dead. About that I have no doubt. If I were still alive, I’d be living in a trailer park in Greenville, South Carolina, with a bunch of kids, some of whom would be dead. Because that’s what I was raised to be. It’s not about good or evil or justice. That is what I was supposed to do, and it’s what would have happened. But because I was a baby dyke, I was not going to be pregnant at 15. It could have happened, because I was being raped fairly regularly, but I lucked out. I lucked out by getting syphilis at 12, so I’m sterile.

All of the places that mean I’m alive actually had some built-in cost to them, but they’re costs that the women in my family pay regularly and die from. Early pregnancy is really destructive to your health. Alcoholism, drug addiction — no, you don’t survive too long. But I read books and learned how to hide, which is how you survive in violent families.

I’ve always been guilty about it. I still am, but I recognize it. To know that and to write stories out of it and not hate yourself is a profoundly feminist act. But some of your motivation for doing things also comes out of the guilt. Looking at my family and seeing, you know, because I got appendicitis my freshman year in college and went to a doctor who realized that I had pelvic inflammatory disease and treated me for it — because that could have killed me if it had continued
untreated. I lucked out by getting sick at 14 and getting antibiotics. Otherwise, I would have had syphilis, which is, you know, not a good diagnosis. Luck. I believe in luck, like the rest of the working class. But maybe within the luck there’s also purpose. Or you tell yourself there’s a reason. There’s a reason I’m alive and my cousin Billy’s dead, and my mom is dead, and all my aunts are dead. All the women older than me that I looked to for a model are dead, and I’ve got to be the model.

ANDERSON: So your family came back full force in your life in the early 80s, with your mother’s death.

ALLISON: Pretty much before, with Barnard. When the women’s movement broke around me and my mother’s cancer reoccurred, I went home.

ANDERSON: What was that like, to have that immediacy and to have your family back in your life? How did you do that?

ALLISON: I think the hard thing to explain is that it really did all happen in the same few months, and I was crazy, but I was not going to tell my mother about Barnard — not going to happen. I didn’t discuss my sex life in any other than the most meager terms.

ANDERSON: Sure.

ALLISON: And she was in such bad shape. Her reoccurrence of cancer occurred at a moment when she was not ready to deal with it. She refused chemo and refused treatment. I went home because my sisters were hysterical and they knew she was going to die. I went home because I could persuade her to begin chemo again. And my mother bargained ruthlessly with me. She wanted to go home to visit her sister, my aunt Dot, a difficult trip all around because it had to be accomplished with my stepfather. Her deal with me is that she would resume chemo if I would come and make the drive. So in the months after Barnard, I went home, (laughs) got into a Pontiac convertible, and drank Pabst Blue Ribbon from Florida to Greenville.

ANDERSON: Oh God.

ALLISON: We’d hit these Denny’s, and Mom would get out, and they’d go eat, and I’d sit on the curb and drink. I’m like, Okay, I’m going to get through this. I’m not going to kill the son of a bitch. I’m not going to say anything, I’m just going to make this trip. Make this trip. Oh God. He never changed. He was always a monster.

But then we got to Greenville and spent four days with my mother and her sisters — my aunt Dot and my aunt Grace, the ones that were still alive — and I was reminded of who I was. The world I stepped into — that feminist revolutionary army — is a family, and it’s
a good family. It’s got the flaws of a family and fucks up occasionally and fails you on occasion. Stepping back into my birth family when I was old enough not to hate them, was really important. Not that — There were places I hated them, and they were just — they were still themselves.

(laughs) Oh God. One of my cousins asked me to marry him while we were there. (laughter) “They said you were a little strange, but I think we got a connection.” He was drunk, too. And then the stupid son of a bitch really thought that I would marry his ass. I’m like, You are my mother’s sister’s child. I’m not marrying you. Are you crazy? He was like, Well — He was such an idiot. He was a sweet boy, but he was a fool. But it was like one of these — My family is such a caricature. You guys are just — do you know how absurd you all are sitting on that porch?

Fortunately, by the time we hit Greenville and I was no longer having to be in the car with my stepfather, I stopped drinking and I could pay attention. I took a lot of pictures. Some of those pictures are just devastating. It was the last pictures before — Within two years, most of those people were dead. My aunts died, my cousins, a bunch of them died. Cancer went through them like a wildfire.

But it was very strong. And then it was like, You know, everybody hates us, and there are some reasons why we were hateful, but there are some reasons why we were astonishing. I could do this; this is what I want to do. I want to make a story in which these people are honored and loved, and not reduced because they are sons of bitches. And they were, on some levels, really, really destructive and don’t take care of each other. We should put that on the page fully. That’s work reasonable to do. That’s what I try to do. Some of my explanations of what I do are self-serving, but, hey, I’m a writer. I’ve got to have my myths.

My mother went back into chemo and lived another decade, entirely because I spent those three days in the car with my stepfather. Whoo, kicked my ulcer in again, but, hey, it bought her some time and bought me some time.

And by the time I came back to New York, I had a different stance for dealing with everything that was following on Barnard. And it was like, Don’t fuck with us, we have shotguns. Going to fact meetings and the Feminist Anti-censorship Taskforce meetings with that stance was lifesaving. Because otherwise I was coming in damaged, you know, barely surviving being constantly assaulted. But instead I came back my mother’s girl, which is, Who do you think you are? We have stood up against people who have hated us for centuries. We are hateful, we are contemptible. We do not die, you can’t kill me.

That was really a positive thing, and it’s out of that that I wrote all those poems. I invented the myth of us as indestructible, which is a myth because we’re not, but it’s useful, really useful. And remade the connections with my sisters, who had, by that time — thank God — gotten over their fundamentalist tendencies.
ANDERSON: Let’s talk about what you found when you got to California. California lesbians, you were just saying, are a (inaudible) bunch.

ALLISON: The bunch — I moved into San Francisco. It would have been different if I’d moved into Oakland. I think I would have moved into a much more diverse community. But I moved into San Francisco, in part, in the aftermath of Barnard and the sex wars. And that I had spent some of that time thinking I was going to die. It was just one more push toward, I am just going to be matter-of-fact about who I am in the world. I am this — not high — low-femme bitch. This is my life, and I’m not going to fuck around anymore. And I’m not going pretend that I can be monogamous and do relationships and things. And then, of course, I had to add to the mix that I did go to an incest survivor’s group, and I did some of that work that I had been avoiding for decades.

There’s a lot of work you can do as a feminist to understand violence and the repercussions of violence and how it shapes you, but some of it is really resistant to change, really resistant. Going to meetings and realizing that I was not this unique, astonishing creature. No, we’re all prone to self-destructive models. But the particular permutations of how I had organized my self-destructive life were really interesting and complicated.

I call myself high-function broken, which for me is a way of talking about all the ways that all the experiences of my life have contributed to making me a really — I mean, I can do shit. I can buckle down and work, and that is a power and a talent that many people don’t have access to. But I am broken. You know, I was broken so young and so thoroughly that there is damage that — I tell people it’s life work. I will get through this incarnation and barely manage to become what most people are to begin with. There’s just some real serious broken parts of me. I try desperately not to be destructive with other people and act out who, in fact, my stepfather wanted me to be. But, you know, he got me when I was really a baby, so there are places where I’m just really profoundly self-destructive and broken.

Coming into San Francisco — boy, all of my friends in New York really hated that I moved to San Francisco. The people who love me, like Jewelle and Amber, were grateful and thrilled, because they were afraid I was going to die. And I was close to dying, or organizing my own death, in New York, and destroying myself. So they were thrilled that I was going, you know, walking out of that relationship, leaving that environment, and trying to take care of myself.

They were happy about that, but they were also worried that I was moving to San Francisco, because I was going to go bad, was going to go California. I went California. I bought a crystal, you know? (laughs) I joined a massage group, I went to ACA [Adult Children of Alcoholics] meetings, and got myself a cat from the Oakland ASPCA.
[American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] and joined a gym.

Some of the stuff that I was doing to try to be physically healthy — like recover from the damage to my immune system — meant that I had to do things like walk in sunshine. You know, this is really ridiculous, but I really did have some major depletion issues. Californians talk about all this stuff all the time, to a point where it struck me as really absurd. And that was some of my impression of California as la-la land and that whole level of what is encouraged, a level of self-indulgence in California that is normal, that I found almost amusing. (laughs) But I played it.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you adapted, huh?

ALLISON: I adapted. I did it. And gradually recovered my health, but it took at least a year. One of the things I did was that I set myself the task of walking. I had to learn to walk without a cane again and join a gym. I joined the gym in the Mission. I got an apartment in the Mission and joined the gym with what was essentially Mexican American Olympic bodybuilders, and they thought I was pretty absurd. I was pretty absurd. Here comes this fat dyke and she can barely hobble around. But I was — I’m good at doing lists.

In the same way, I joined feminist groups and started going to readings and public programs. I went to the Women’s Center a few times, I went to the bookstores. But there was something going on in California that I knew very little about, which was that this community had also shattered, but they had shattered not as a result of the Barnard sex wars. They had shattered earlier in ways that did not make sense to me. But there were people I knew because of the small press movement and feminist publishing and from this feminist bookstore stuff, because I had been working with feminist bookstores for years. That — boy, they hated each other.

Some of it — I figured out pretty quickly — was that there had been lesbian couples who had started some of the institutions. And when those couples had broken up, some of the infighting was deeply personal, and it split. That’s a phenomenon in our community that I understand and recognize, and I can work around it and understand it and deal with it. But when I got to San Francisco and it was cold, and I bought myself a leather jacket and — I’m femme, so I hung rhinestones all over it. I walked into the local women’s bookstore on Mission Street, walked in the door, and got glared at like I was a monster from outer space, and treated with contempt. And I’m a lesbian feminist writer. Those people were so mean and so unpleasant. I’m like, How the hell are you staying in business?

I quickly figured out they were barely staying in business, and that the community here was so embattled that all the fighting that I had seen and the resentment that was post-Barnard in New York, they had been doing a lot longer and a lot more virulently. I don’t think they
understood how bad it looked to someone stepping in fresh. But it was like there were so many feminist organizations you could not even engage with, because it was like, you showed up for a meeting and they wanted you to tell your beads, figuring out where you were on this fault line of old fights that they had in place that meant not a damn thing to me and I didn’t care about. I wasn’t dating them girls, so did I want to, like, make friends with one and fight the other?

So it was really remarkable not to join with feminist organizations, but I did not. I just backed up, come in another direction, and went into what was essentially a mixed organization, lesbian and gay organizing, which is different than just going into feminist stuff, because they weren’t having such horrific fights and they weren’t treating me so badly. Gay men actually think leather lesbians are kind of cute. They don’t take us seriously, but I don’t care, so it didn’t matter.

But I joined Out/Look and met the people there. And there were things that I was used to and were normal for me that they didn’t know about, because I had been working in small press publishing and queer publishing for so long that, you know, I know a lot and I know how to do stuff, so I could contribute. I started making friends.

One of the complications was that I had had a number of gay male friends in New York die, so I was hesitant to make new friends in the gay men’s community. But, you know, it’s going to happen anyway. So I became friends with Bo Houston, even though I resisted because I knew Bo had AIDS and he was not doing well. I remember when I started deciding, You know, some of these boys are going to die, and I don’t think I can stand it again, but what are you going to do?

But that was also a different writing community. San Francisco’s writing community, again, struck me as very California. People took a long time to finish books, and they didn’t publish much, and they could talk about being a writer even though they had never published a thing and never seemed to take the word terribly seriously. I’m like, Wait a minute. What have you written? (laughs) It was a very interesting education. In some ways, a lot less professional and a lot less focused, a lot less ambitious, and there were ways in which that was really good for me, really good for me. They had a sense of humor.

Some of what had really gotten tiresome about New York was that the sense of humor had slacked quite a bit there. People were so serious. So I made friends and new connections, met some really interesting, complicated people, nominally heterosexual, which was interesting — feminist heterosexual writers, which I had had not that much engagement with in working at Conditions and the stuff I’d done in New York. Working at the Voice, I had met a bunch of them, but they were different in California since they were not competitive in the same way that people were competitive in New York. It was good for me as a writer.

It was a bit unsettling as a feminist. And I started having more of a struggle in terms of issues about writing in the mixed queer
community. Bo and I became the fiction editors at Out/Look, and found ourselves almost immediately embattled around the issues of legitimacy of voice. I don’t know if you know about that.

I can make a lot of jokes about a whole year and all the stuff I did with it, but really, it meant that I had to think about myself again and look at some of my femme stuff in a different way. My friendship with Jewelle and Amber — because we talked about some of this stuff. Some of this stuff is hard to articulate, hard to see, hard to admit, and then hard to change.

ANDERSON: What about the femme stuff were you coming up against that you had to change?

ALLISON: That tendency to subsume myself in relationships. It’s a funny thing. I had a rule about not being in relationships, but I would, with fuck — there’s no other word to use — with fuck buddies, I could still do that femme thing in which they were more important. The priority was always the other person’s emotional life, not my own. And changing that was really complicated.

And there were very few people I could talk to about it, but Jewelle and Amber and some butch girls. Cherríe Moraga. I can remember sitting in Cherríe’s truck and talking about some of this stuff, which is really — it’s so dangerous and so embattled. And because the whole world isn’t as articulate or as informed about what our issues are, it’s not a casual conversation you can have. You really have to be able to talk to people who are taking an equal amount of risk. That was an important watershed time.

Some of the stuff we were still, and still are, getting a handle on. How do you change your worst tendencies while hanging on to your best? Do you know? You don’t want to lose your sexual impulse completely, or your ability to emotional engagement or trust. But then again, you have to look at some of what you do as a pattern and realize that, you know, this is pretty destructive. I just never wanted to engage with a doctrinaire system that would create rules that would not allow me to have the hope of a genuine relationship, sexual satisfaction, and, occasionally, transcendence.

This is the part that gets left out a lot of this conversation. It’s — for some of us — transcendence. Understanding more about the world, yourself, your concept of joy, your spirituality. A lot of that — the doorway is sex. If you put too many bars around that door, you cut off your access to that kind of revelation. There isn’t any other way to talk about it without using the language of my childhood, the Baptist church (laughs), but it’s true.

There is a way in which we can become — we used to say politically correct. We don’t use that language so much, and it’s an inadequate language, but, really, there’s almost a language that they used to use in the 30s that’s kind of old-school commie, in which people will trade off huge portions of their life for some sense of purpose,
meaning, or security. And there were ways in which our feminist convictions tempted us toward that. Resisting it was deeply complicated because we still wanted to remain feminists and make changes in the world, but not trade our whole lives for it and not become robots.

That postfeminist thing where, “After the revolution, you’ll be allowed to have butch-femme relationships. You won’t want to, of course, but —” That was absurd, that didn’t work. But it is a very complicated internal process that you go through. It has to happen in a situation with other people who you can trust making those kinds of changes or taking those risks. Not easy to do in an embattled place, not possible in an embattled place.

ANDERSON: How was California around the butch-femme stuff? How was that different from New York?

ALLISON: They were not as good at it on some levels, but then again –

ANDERSON: Like they didn’t like the leather jacket?

ALLISON: No. There was a granola lesbian presence. You know, the granola lesbians. They all wear Birkenstocks and flannel shirts, and that was pretty much omnipresent.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: At least in New York, if you — in the whole New York community — if you stepped into the women of color community in New York, you stepped into butch-femme. You stepped into high-femme, high-butch, and a lot of emphasis on presentation of self. There was an emphasis on presentation of self in California that was so granola ritualized that it was really tedious. I didn’t even know how to engage with it. I mean, I can do that stuff. I’m now living in the country. I’ve got a flannel shirt — I’ve got a bunch of them. But I didn’t want to be that person all the time.

ANDERSON: And you probably didn’t want to sleep with them either.

ALLISON: Well, no, they just didn’t — they didn’t have that much of a charge. Maybe once or twice, if they could get them to go to a party. Scandalizing girls is always tempting.

ANDERSON: (laughs) So how did you find Alix? Or how did you find other lovers?

ALLISON: I met Alix at a safe-sex demonstration, because when — I quickly joined in the leather community, joined the Outcasts, that was — by that time, they were so long established and had so much in place that I didn’t need to do all the organizing that I had done in New York. So I
could engage at a distance and not have to be primarily intermeshed with that. Also, that group had a history of ex-lovers and splits and resentments that I just didn’t want to be part of, and so I kept my distance from.

Meanwhile, there’s a whole bunch of lesbians I had never met. No, let’s be clear — dykes. It was dykes on my reference point. I need me some interesting working-class girls. And, bluntly, I need rough trade. I need girls who are on the edge of being dangerous. Finding them in California was actually a little more complicated because of the omnipresence of granola lesbians. Easier in San Francisco, easier in the bars. There’s always butch-femme in the bars. But we were about to enter another transitional — So I had a moment. It’s a good damn thing I got that moment before it changed, because it quickly became tedious.

ANDERSON: What do you mean? What was that moment that you’re talking about?

ALLISON: Because they were still adventuresome. Very quickly — it seemed really quickly. I suppose if I really looked back in my journal and followed it out, it wasn’t as quick as it seemed. But some of the gender stuff that started to happen was deeply complicated and anti-butch, and I need a butch community. As a femme, I need it.

Also, there’s a lot of public representation of lesbians that’s about butch iconography. One of the interesting things for me is that the leather community is about butch iconography — a lot. There’s a lot of high-femme stuff, but — Ooh honey. You know, there’s a reason I’m sitting on that motorcycle in all those pictures. Appropriation of the icon. (laughs)

It really quickly — There became this emphasis on — The particular lesbian community that I was interacting with the most shifted to an identification with gay men’s community that was a place I didn’t want to go. I mean, I had completely comfortable relationships with the gay men’s community — particularly after I got kicked out of the gay men’s leather community — as writers and as activists, but I did not want to be a gay man. And I did not want to enact a gay man iconography in public.

Some of the appropriation of the leather stuff is really sexually powerful to me and I’ll go there, but I didn’t ever want to be a faggot. I wanted to have faggot friends and go to parties. And they could be having sex in that corner, and I’ll be looking over here at this girl. But very quickly, there were a lot of butch lesbians who wanted to be faggots, and it wasn’t my reference. Some of it was about gender shift, and wanting to really be that male icon, and the power. Some of it was more complicated, that I don’t always understand. But it meant that a kind of butch-femme relationship I saw developing much more often, I didn’t want to be part of, because I didn’t want those hard rules. Because, for me, a lot of the charge is in resistance to the hard rules and resistance to some of the identity stuff.
This is very complicated to talk about though. I mean, I like me some butch girls, and I like me some difficult butch girls, but the struggle is the charge. And being the kind of femme I am is the charge. Which means that, most of the time, I’m in rebellion against the expectations of the butch girls I’m engaging with, and that’s charged for me. And the ones that I am deeply attracted to are also attracted to the charge.

The ones that actually want to marry you, move you to the country, and get you pregnant, I’m not interested in that at all. I find that not only tedious, I find it offensive. And suddenly there was this whole push towards that. Very tricky. Some of it seemed to me to be girls who wanted to shift gender because they couldn’t face menopause. (laughs) Bad, bad, bad. You’ve got to have courage to go through menopause.

Lots of other stuff was going on, lots of other stuff. It’s not even possible for me to sort some of it out. And some of it scared me. Some of the gender stuff genuinely did frighten me. And some of it, I have to say, over time I got more comfortable with, and changed. It was where I suddenly just found myself in my own conservative places, some of which is, I love butch women. If there are going to be more transgender people and fewer butch people, I’m going to be less and less happy. That’s a conservatism. I really do not have the right to tell other women what kind of person they get to be. You know? If you’re going to understand the nature of freedom, you understand that that means that other people are free to make their own choices. It might be tragic. (laughs) There might be fewer people that I will find sexually interesting in the world. But it is what it is.

And there are places in which being friends with people who were shifting gender and seeing how it really worked out was really important, because there were people for whom making those transitions — like I said, they were happier, more successful, more independent people, and genuinely interesting to me, even though I might not be wanting to have sex with them.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Now, they were patient with some of my changes, I have to be patient with some of theirs. How it began to affect the community began to worry me, because there began to be an anti-butch construction that scared me, and that’s complicated and has changed over time. There actually, at this point, is beginning to be a new ideology of valuing and encouraging young butch women that I find really hopeful.

ANDERSON: Do you see that with the women that you’re teaching?

ALLISON: Yeah. And I see it happening again in California, in San Francisco, which has been, really, one of the most resistant communities in terms of, you’re not even allowed to talk about gender stuff because it’s such
an embattled, endangered subject. There have been enough people who have taken their — who have been incredibly courageous about saying that they were uncomfortable with some of the places we’ve taken it, and gotten people to speak again. It’s still not acceptable.

We’re still — this is almost more embattled than the whole sex wars division, is this gender shift. Because the other thing you need to remember is the academic sector — and there’s a publishing and writing sector. In those areas, the predominance of gender over feminism has been astonishing. The women’s studies programs have disappeared, and they have gender studies programs. Women’s centers have disappeared, and you have freedom centers, which have long lists of specific identity communities, a lot of which really acts against any discussion of identity, any complicated discussion. In some cases not, but in some cases yes. That’s complicated, and that has stolen some of what we put in place in the early women’s movement, in the feminist movement, in the lesbian/gay freedom movement. Some of what we put in place has almost been watered down or washed away, shifting to a focus on gender. Now, some of that has been powerful and empowering and profoundly feminist, but not always.

You have to remember, we go places out of fear sometimes, too, and easy solutions. And it was always easier to say women’s than to say lesbian. And it was always easier to say feminist than lesbian. And then it got to be easier to say gender than to say queer or feminist or be specific. Always remember that. If you can make a category that a distributor can sell in a bookstore and a university can get funding for in a program, it’s going to dominate in corporate capitalism. And it has.

But there is always the rebellion of the young and the courageous, and I’m watching it shift again. I’m hopeful that it will shift with the information that we’ve developed. Because there are a lot of people who have gone through some horrific struggles to really examine gender and what it means to be in gender rebellion. We lose track of the fact that there are still people who want to kill us.

Like I said, I was just in Wyoming, with all the Matthew Shepherd repercussions of that community, remembering that we need a complicated ideology. One of the wonders of — and the wealth of impact of — talking about class and feminism, is talking about all the complicated ways that class should be reflected through feminism and actually impacts on it. Then looking at the fact that class and race are places where violence comes from in our interactions with the world. Always remember, it was a working-class boy that murdered Matthew Shepherd. It was a working-class boy that murdered Brandon Teena. And it is mostly going to be working-class kids who will kill us in the truck stops in the central parts of this country once you step off the coast. It’s always where you’re going to be in trouble around class and race and violence. We talk about feminism as if it happens in a rarified, safe world. It doesn’t. It happens on the street, it happens inside your family.
ALLISON: I always kept in mind that one of my cousins might kill me by being publicly humiliated. And then again, they might marry me. (laughter)

ANDERSON: You’ve been talking about this stuff with young people for so many years now. I mean, really, you’ve been on the circuit with your books and with this material for decades. Where do they register now, this generation, in terms of the legacy of the women’s movement or the gay and lesbian movement? Do you find them sort of in a more conservative place than the 18-year-olds ten years ago? Do you find more hope in this current generation? How are they responding to your work differently?

ALLISON: I work hard to manufacture hope. Sometimes it gets a little tricky. They are very conservative, depressingly so. But then again, we’re at war and we’re in a recession, and there are huge parts of the country that don’t recognize that fact — either fact, by the way — but it is true.

I teach a lot. I teach writing, and writing is always a gate to finding out more about people really quickly, especially queer writers. The hardest thing I’ve had to deal with the last four or five years have been really conservative young queer kids, and conservative in ways that I did not expect or predict.

The thing I believe is that what we have is an involuntary draft of the working class, all based around the fact that a lot of these kids are getting scholarships that put them into ROTC [Reserve Officers’ Training Corps] or put them into — they feed naturally into the National Guard, which means they feed into Iraq. And a lot of those kids are working-class kids or kids of color. A huge percentage of the queer community is military positive, and we don’t pay much attention to that, haven’t paid much attention to that, in the history of feminism.

My girlfriend was in the army. She was Soldier of the Year one month, and then a month later, up on charges for being queer, and kicked out of the army. She has a matrix that is not my matrix, that I knew very little about. But once I began to look at it, I could see it, and look at my family and see my cousins — my boy cousins particularly, but also some of the girls — who have that same matrix. They love authority. They do well in situations of defined authority. They love their country and they have a whole ideology of America that believes in what this country stands for.

To be teaching young queer kids in mixed programs — university programs or some of the summer programs I teach in — means I meet them when they will talk about that stuff. They believe they want to be a part of something, some force for good, so they have a concept of what they will do. Some of them will volunteer to go to Iraq, believing in it, under this president, this criminal administration, in this terrible time. And trying to talk to them about their lives in complicated ways as queers has been overwhelming and devastating.
One of the best young writers I’ve met in the last decade — a wonderful young working-class woman from Michigan — trying to talk her out of re-upping; knowing for a fact that if she re-ups, she’ll be in Iraq. “No, honey, don’t do this, please don’t do this.” And then having to argue with her and talk with her about all the reasons that she thinks she should do this, and realizing where, in fact, we’ve lost a lot of kids. They don’t know their own history; they don’t know their history in his last century. They don’t know the history of the United States since the Vietnam War. But they also don’t know their history as queers. So they do not know what, in fact, they’re going to be presented with when they have to go into the don’t-ask-don’t-tell military.

Meanwhile, they’re full of faith and passion, and a commitment to a genuine sense of freedom and an ideology of this country that is this country at its best. But they’re not living in this country at its best. They’re living in this country at its worst moment in what I think is two centuries.

I think this is the most criminal administration since [Ulysses] Grant, and they’ll all go to jail if we do our jobs. But meanwhile, our kids are getting ground up, and they don’t have a community. This is the thing that is overwhelming to me. They don’t have the community that we have or that we put in place. And they think they do because of the Internet and because there are queers on television. They think there is a community. But they do not have the immediate access to resources and support that we put in place in our bookstores, in our women’s centers, in our rape crisis centers. Fuck, they don’t even have the support that the gay men put into place in the bars. They have the illusion of it. It’s scary to watch.

I’m still hopeful though, because there are still people who are willing to be foot soldiers in a revolution and who hope for the best. And they read the books. The books are still there. There was just this wonderful celebration of Pat Parker’s life. You can be a young queer and read Pat Parker and know things that nobody’s going to tell you on daytime television in America right now.

ANDERSON: How do they respond to your work that’s different?

ALLISON: Well, it’s interesting. For the most part, what I run into over and over again is that they’re — When I show up, the thing that most astonishes them is my sense of humor, because they’re not used to the concept of a feminist with a sense of humor. I meet a lot of young queers whose mothers or aunts are flannel lesbians, Birkenstock lesbians, so their idea of who a lesbian is, is kind of — I’m not that person. (laughs) I’m raucous and working class, and I’ve got a very advanced sense of humor, and it is often astonishing to them, and it’s kind of freeing, but it takes a bit. First they’re in shock, and then they get all giggly, and they’ll tell me wonderful stories.

And then I get letters. Jesus God, I get letters. That’s the bane and the wonder of my life, is the correspondence, because I get just
enormous numbers of letters from young queers. They read *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and then they read — The two things that trigger it all the time are *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. A lot of it is because of the butch-femme stuff in there. And then they read *Skin*. And they’ll write me because they want feminism. They want the license to be themselves and to change the world, and they’re not getting enough of it, so they write me. Oy, oy. And there are ways in which I fail completely to be what they want me to be. (laughs)

But then again, Grace Paley just died. I remember meeting Grace Paley and trying to make her a living saint, because there are ways in which I think she was and is in my life. Having Grace Paley, with her highly advanced sense of humor, tease me out of making her into something she was not. And so I try to keep it in mind that I am willing to let them make me over into what they need as long as we remember that I’m still myself and we can struggle around this.

I want the stories. I fight constantly. The thing about having been a finalist for the National Book Award and being semi-respectable in some circles is that I can fight at a lot of these magazines to get young queer writers published. And I do that, because they’re losing the access to getting their stories published in queer venues. There are just fewer and fewer of them. In some ways they’re going to be — We’re at a transition point. There are going to be more, and the Internet is going to provide some access, but it’s not enough now.

So in some ways, the community has shut down and is shutting down. I see ways that it’s coming back, but the kids are going to have to make it, and they’re going to have to make it out of their own need. I can help some. I can help by reading their stories, pushing them to do their best stories, getting them published in venues that — experimental publications and places like *Tin House*, getting them to look at queer stuff, because they will. There really has been a sea change in that there is not so much prejudice against queer material. They often don’t have the skills to actually judge some of it, but you can fight to get young queers published. You do still have to fight though.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: And they need all the help they can get. And they need to be held to a high standard and not to become caricatures of themselves. The hardest thing is to persuade them that they don’t have to explain. Explaining is the death of good writing. Don’t explain. Just put the story on the page and let the reader work it out.

This last year I taught a workshop as part of the Lambda program, and there are ways in which I think that the Lambda Literary Awards — it’s very conservative on one level, very. But meanwhile, if you’re going to get access to young queers, you still need to step into those venues and do that stuff.

Really interesting young writers. If they all do the work that they could do, it will be a different world. That makes me very hopeful
— deeply hopeful. And God, they’re going to suffer in the process, and that makes me sad. I wish they had more support. I wish they had just some of the things that I’ve had. Lord.

ANDERSON: Do you ever wake up here and wonder how you got here?

ALLISON: All the time.

ANDERSON: I mean, you’ve been in Guerneville for how long? Ten years?

ALLISON: Well, we moved up here just before Wolf was born, and he’s 15.

ANDERSON: Okay. So you’ve been living in a small town in northern California for 15 years.

ALLISON: I took three years out.

ANDERSON: You’re the mother of a teenage boy.

ALLISON: Yeah. (laughs)

ANDERSON: You’ve been in a committed relationship for almost 20 years?

ALLISON: Good God, yes.

ANDERSON: This is not the life you imagined 20 years ago.

ALLISON: But I never imagined living this long either.

ANDERSON: No, you didn’t, but this also doesn’t resemble how you were setting yourself up.

ALLISON: No, no, and I try constantly to have it not become predictable or easy. Life will correct you, life will shake you up. Stuff happens. The criminal enterprises of this government — and then people die that you love, and you look again at your life. Also, watching lesbians get old, the older lesbian community, because now I’m getting to be an older lesbian. (laughs) We don’t take care of our own very well, and we don’t provide resources, and what safety net was in place is gone. That’s scary. Meanwhile, I’ve stumbled into being middle class.

ANDERSON: How did that happen? Beyond the success of your books.

ALLISON: I married well.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you did. Is that a comfortable place for you to be, calling yourself middle class? This life, this whole –
ALLISON: No, no. I also don’t believe it. And that is another fight, because there is a lot of — I’m raising a middle-class child, and I’ve been enjoying having a middle-class childhood with him, but I grew up in my family. And one of the things that I talk about constantly is that, if you’re shaped in a working-class family, even if you manage to find some margin by which you begin to live a middle-class existence, you were still shaped by and you are the product of that family. You are still essentially working class. There is stuff I can’t change, is just not going to change, and it’s a constant struggle in my family.

My son is invariably teasing me because I have to have canned food in the cupboard — have to — and he is constantly going through the canned food, explaining to me that I’ve got old canned food that’s going to kill him, and then he makes jokes about it. He can. He’s been raised middle class. It’s not a joke to me. I begin to panic.

I’m bad at money. I’m bad at taking care of money, paying bills, paying taxes, because I have all these places of conditioned panic and desperation that come out of being raised poor. The places where I become fearful, hesitant, and wrong-headed are essentially about having been raised poor in this culture and in a state of contempt, which is a working-class life. Middle-class people don’t have those fault line breaks.

Now, the criminal thing that we do is that we take the children of the working class and we give them scholarships and send them to college, and then we tell them they’re not working class. But they work through the world out of the patterns that were taught to them and ingrained in them. So, you know, I can remember the socialists and the commies talking about the bourgeoisie, and the worst of the bourgeoisie is the middle class that got a little cash. We are the petite bourgeoisie, and we are easily criminalized. We easily go bad because we’re fearful. Yes, goddammit, we’re fearful. We are still the working class. We just have a little more access to resources. It doesn’t mean we know how to use those resources or that we trust them. We can’t even act in our own self-interest sometimes. It’s that much damage.

We need a more complicated way to talk about it, particularly for all those kids that got scholarships, went off to college, lost their families of origin — because there is that break that happens, and you’ve got to do some work to get your family back once that break has happened. But we don’t genuinely become middle class. We don’t genuinely have access to things.

In my relationship with Alix, the complicated stuff that I have learned — because she was raised middle class. So she has — I call it the sense of entitlement that she was raised with. She believes that she is entitled to certain things. I don’t, I can’t. I fight desperately to make myself act as if I do, but I do not have that thing.

One of the reasons that makes our relationship successful is that, as a teenager, she fell out of that network and went off to — she went to jail and a halfway house, and became an alcoholic and lived on the street, and got an immersion in working-class life that changed her
profoundly, but it didn’t make her working class. She went off to jail and acted like a middle-class girl and, you know, they were generous with her and didn’t kill her and taught her a few things, but she had all of that conditioning. She’s still who she was. All the stuff that has changed in the life that she has lived since — living on the streets, being a drunk, getting sober, joining the army, getting kicked out — she still has all that conditioning and that sense of entitlement that I can’t acquire. I can’t acquire it. And my boy has it, and I worked hard that he should have it because it gives you a lot more safety and power in this culture.

We don’t even have a language for talking about a lot of this stuff, and it means that we work against our own interests. A lot of these working-class academics are working against their own interests, and they don’t even understand it. When you tell them, Yes, you’re still working class, you’re still a part of your tribe. You can speak on events at this new tribe that you joined, but you’re still a product of your tribe. It has a huge impact to tell them that they still are who they were, because they’re being robbed. You need to take pride in your people and speak for them.

ANDERSON: Does Wolf have a sense of being a part of your people that way?

ALLISON: He’s scared to death of my people. He’s met them. (laughs) He talks about my sisters as the scary aunts. He’s right. My sisters are scary. I love them but, yeah, they get — you know. It’s a different world, growing up in a queer family in northern California.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So they don’t feel like his people to him.

ALLISON: I think that he’s just at the point where he’s beginning to do self-definition — 15, adolescence. He’s a young 15. So we’re just beginning to watch that happen.

He takes enormous pride in Alix and me, and he has already gotten in fights defending us. And he has a sense of us, and he identifies as a bisexual, when I can tell you, frankly, I don’t see any bi in him. The boy falls in love with boys. But who knows who he’s going to be or how that is all going to work out, but he identifies that he is essentially queer, and he’s already paid for it. Even in northern California, it’s an embattled position. He was ten the first time that it was made clear to him how dangerous it was to be who he was. And we have done everything we can to protect him and to educate him and to hold the world accountable and go to school. I go to PTA, Jesus God!

But it is still a struggle, and it is going to be a struggle. I think it’s going to get more complicated because I think he’s going to be a codependent kid, because he’s a caretaker. He loves us, and I have my stuff, and he’s always, he wants to take care of his mommas. Ooh, now there’s stuff about that that’s wonderful and admirable, but I’ve been through incest survivors groups and ACA meetings, and I know where it
can also go, and, Lord help him, he’s going to grow up and buy his boyfriend a car. Oh, (sighs) I have to talk to him more about that. We try to talk to him a lot about how real life works and some of this stuff.

ANDERSON: Is it a struggle for you to parent?

ALLISON: Oh Christ, yes, and it’s scary, very frightening. Alix is — I wouldn’t have done it with anyone else. Some of the virtues are her particular matrix, her particular kind of butch and the risks she’s willing to take, but also that she’s been sober so long. She just has a lot of tools in place.

It’s peculiar, the mesh of the sober community and the feminist community. There’s an enormous amount of information and power there that has been vital to my life. I’m not really an alcoholic or a drug addict. In my family, it’s the boys who have those problems. I’m just bent and deeply broken, but I use all the resources of those communities, and it’s made a huge difference.

But it’s sometimes so astonishing to me to sit up and look around, living in this beautiful place, in this family that I adore. Thank God I’ve got them, because the rest of the country is really sucking a big egg right now. I don’t believe in it, don’t trust it. I try to keep in mind that it’s a privilege and a wonder to occupy this place, and I get to do work that I love. I mean, it’s always tricky about making a living as a writer, and people think you’re rich. You have a movie, you must be rich. Yeah, right, son. God, I’m still a dyke, unemployable in most places in the world. It’s a real struggle. And at the same time, it’s an enormous privilege.

I tell young writers that there is a kind of way in which you will always be poor if you’re a queer writer. You will. You’ll never make the money that heterosexuals make, it’s a fact. And as a writer, you will never make the money that a lot of other enterprises will make. But this is a poverty that is, by comparison to the poverty I have known, so genteel, so much easier.

Oh God, but it does — Part of why I live where I live is you can live up here in this small-town, semi-rural environment. We couldn’t survive in San Francisco. I’d have to make more money, and I wouldn’t be able to raise my child in the middle-class way in which I want to raise him. I want him to have all that access to resources that I never had. It is a wonder and a privilege.

The wealth though. The richest thing in my life has been the people I have known. Let’s be clear. I’m not being sentimental or small when I say this. I’ve known extraordinary people who gave their full selves to changing the world. Do you know what I mean? Who believed in something larger than themselves. So many people in the world have no concept of that. Who live their lives in self-contempt, in self-hatred, in meaninglessness, in feeling that they have no purpose. I have been among people who knew themselves to have purpose, who shared that purpose with me. They have been my friends and my lovers.
I could die tomorrow, and it has been an extraordinary journey. I just don’t want to die tomorrow.

ANDERSON: And you live in California, so you probably won’t. You’ve still got your acupuncturist.

ALLISON: Well, with any luck, I can help put this administration in jail, and then do the work to — We’re going to have to do so much work in the world, as Americans, over the next few decades. Oy vey.

ANDERSON: And writing is going to be a huge part of that.

ALLISON: It’s also one of the things saving us now. I literally teach all over the world and get paid to do it, which is kind of miraculous. Pity I don’t get paid as well as I’d like to be, but — Going to other countries and meeting people — they read our books. They know that the war that we’re engaged in, the criminal actions that this country has been engaged in recently, do not reflect the majority of this country. They read our literature, and in our literature we are occasionally our best selves. I believe in that. It’s a reason to write. And in our literature we have created a feminist presence that is powerful. It has changed us, it has changed this country, it has changed the world. A lot of people don’t keep track of it, but even the most fearful conservative people in America have an imagination of how they want their girls to live that is entirely a product of what have managed — some of it the literature, some of it the education. It’s a different world for that reason. So there is feminism, even though very few people want to own the name anymore.
“It Gave Me My Life...”

Suzanne Pharr

June 2005
Suzanne Pharr’s “retirement” has been spent, in large part, nurturing and developing Southerners on New Ground (SONG), a young organization dedicated to LGBTQ liberation and social justice organization in the southern United States. SONG and Suzanne are a perfect match. The group brings together all of the pieces of Pharr’s organizing work over the past four decades—it’s a place to bring together all identities, a place for working class and rural people, queer folks and allies, and is dedicated to both anti-racist work as well as spiritual connection. SONG is steeped in the history and culture of the new and old South, bringing both tradition and grief-stricken histories to bear on a region that has undergone radical transformation over the past 50 years. It’s a movement that is youth-led, immigrant focused, and working at the fore of anti-racist and anti-queer resistance. In their own words, “Being Southerners on New Ground means loving hard histories, giving thanks, making visionary space, pushing forward, being kin, seeking wholeness and realizing there is no liberation in isolation.”

It’s the kind of home that Pharr has been questing for, and indeed creating, for decades. In the tradition of Lillian Smith and alongside contemporaries like Minnie Bruce Pratt and Linda Stout, Suzanne Pharr has been a political organizer, a lesbian and a feminist, an anti-racism activist, and at the helm of some of the South’s most important social change organizations over the past forty years—including the Women’s Project in Arkansas and the Highlander Research and Education Center—with a vision and work ethic comparable to none.

Pharr’s entry point into social change work was the women’s movement in the late 1960s. Like many of her counterparts, Pharr threw herself into the world of lesbian culture and feminist organizing. In New Orleans she helped to create a women’s center, a consciousness-raising group, a collective living space, and cofounded and edited *Distaff*, the first women’s newspaper in the South (in print from roughly 1973-1982). In Arkansas, she was a part of the back-to-the-land movement, while at the same time taking on environmental issues, preparing for the International Women’s Year meeting in Houston in 1977, and organizing against Phyllis Schlafly and the Moral Majority. In 1978, she and a small group of activists began the conversation of starting a women’s shelter in Arkansas, what would later become the Women’s Project.

Pharr calls the Women’s Project the “best work she’s ever done.” Influenced by the work of lesbians of color like Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, the founding vision of the

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Women’s Project was the elimination of both sexism and racism, what would later be called an “intersectional” analysis. Founded in 1980, initially named The Arkansas Women’s Training Project, the mission of the Women’s Project is to “end racism and sexism.”40 Part of the burgeoning anti-violence movement, the Women’s Project was a grassroots education and advocacy organization that took on gay and lesbian issues, employment discrimination, and abortion rights in addition to anti-rape and anti-battery work.

Pharr was lesbian-baited for her work with the project, and rather than duck the charge, she took the issue of lesbian battery head on. Working with the National Coalition against Domestic Violence as the Co-Chair of their Lesbian Task Force, Pharr spent four years traveling around the country and doing homophobia workshops with state coalitions of battered women’s shelters. The workshops grew out of her experience with the anti-violence movement and took on both the lesbian baiting of shelter workers as well as the need to create safer spaces for lesbian survivors of violence. From this work, Pharr developed an incisive analysis about the connections between misogyny and homophobia which became Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism, published in 1988 and distributed by the Women’s Project. She writes that over the years, it has been a privilege to learn from participants, most of whom were battered women and workers in shelters for battered women. It is not an exaggeration to say that they taught me most of what I know on this subject. It was from listening especially to battered women, women of color and lesbians that I drew the connection between homophobia and violence against women and finally the overall connection to economics and sexism. We have said for a long time in the battered women’s movement that all of our truth is found in our stories, and certainly I have found this to be so, for in the stories of battered women I have learned the truth of the interconnectedness of all oppressions and how they are connected to my life as a lesbian.41

While many anti-violence activists were lesbians, few were making the connections between homophobia and sexism. But like many women of color, Pharr’s analysis and approach to organizing understood the intersections between race, class, gender and sexuality. Today, the Women’s Project is still unique in their approach—not only in terms of an intersectional analysis but in the work. Resisting the pressure to become a service-only domestic violence agency, the Women’s Project is still committed to advocacy and awareness about violence in women’s lives.

Under Pharr’s leadership, the Women’s Project addressed systemic and community-based violence as well as violence in relationships. The Project developed the Women’s Watchcare Network, designed to monitor religious, racist, sexist, and anti-gay violence. Pharr became a keen observer of the New Right and she conducted awareness-raising workshops across the country on the right’s strategies using popular education and accessible language. Under the auspices of the Women’s Project, Pharr worked on the No on 9 Campaign in Oregon for a year in 1992 and was the lead organizer for the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force at the 1996 Republican convention.

Pharr took this broad-based, intersectional view of social change to the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee in 1999. The legendary folk school founded by Myles Horton in 1932 was best known for its efforts on behalf of labor and civil rights. She assumed the position of Executive Director for five years with two goals in mind: to bring Highlander into the 21st century by engaging with the most pressing current political issues, and to bring the collective decision making process to a moderately large size staff of 17. Highlander turned its attention to immigration and to youth and democratized the institute’s decision-making process by creating grassroots think tanks as decision-making bodies. As a result of Pharr’s leadership, Highlander is one of the foremost training centers dedicated to a multi-racial, multi-generation vision of justice and leadership.

Suzanne Pharr is a legendary “political handywoman,”—her indomitable organizing skills, sharp political insights, and insistence on “wholeness” have raised the bar for all of the movements she has worked in. Her commitment to family is equally extraordinary. In this narrative, Pharr tells the story of making family with an early lover of hers, Anne, and their commitment to one another through tremendous illness and struggle for over thirty years. For Pharr, it’s another story of feminism, of queer family, the worth of women, and of the involvement of community. She credits her family of origin for “gifts of grace in my life, I remember my farm parents in Georgia who worked through poverty and disability to raise their 8 children and support their church and community. They gave me my life, my values, my determination.”[42] Pharr’s gift has been to marry the essential goodness of her birthright to a broad and enduring vision of justice. She has made the women’s movement live up to the radical intentions behind feminism; she has insisted on fairness and justice for all queer people; and she holds open the door for young leadership and energy. And despite herself, Pharr is an

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[42] Suzanne Pharr website, Suzannepharr.org, 1/6/11
intellectual and a writer, with a particular gift for “connecting the dots” and plain speech, a prophet for “full humanity.”
Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted June 28 – 29, 2005, with:

SUZANNE PHARR
by: KELLY ANDERSON
Knoxville, Tennessee

ANDERSON: So, this is Kelly Anderson and Suzanne Pharr, and we’re at her home in Knoxville, Tennessee, doing an interview for the Voices of Feminism Project with the Sophia Smith Collection. And it’s June 28th. OK. So we’re going to start by talking about your family background. I mean, as I told you, this is meant to be a full-life history versus just your experience in the women’s movement. So let’s talk about both sides. Tell me what you know about your mother’s family and your father’s family, as far back as you have information about them.

PHARR: So, I come from two large families. My mother’s family had seven children. She was the third girl of six girls and one son. And they were Irish, Irish Protestant, a certain kind of Southern — it was kind of Scotch-Irish. People might call themselves Irish, but they were a mixture of British Isles folks. And they came from very poor roots, where they worked hard, worked on little farms. My grandfather did odds and ends. He drove a wagon for Coca-Cola, he ran a little bakery. Today he would be considered a ne’er-do-well, in that he never made lots of money. I adored him. He was just the joy of my life, which is, I think, such a statement of what success is. Is success having made lots of money or is success having your grandchildren think you’re just the best thing that was ever created on earth, that you gave those children joy?

ANDERSON: What are your specific memories of him? Why did you love him so much?

PHARR: He always talked with me — well, one, he adored me. That’s always a good thing, (laughs) But he talked with me in this particular, personal, sort of peer level. He was a little man with asthma and had what’s called a pigeon chest, so he had none of the attributes that you think of for what we’re supposed to admire in big men, men with power, men with great physical strength. He was a small man, pigeon-chested, and he would come to see me, or my family — of course, I was a little kid: I thought he came to see me. And he would tell stories, and in the South we live for stories. Stories are probably the most important things in our
lives, in every kind of way. And he made up stories about animals, and one of my greatest loves also was animals. We would go fishing, and he and I would sit on a creek bank, and he would talk about what we saw, or he wouldn’t talk much — or he would talk, always making up stories about things. I think I was so fully recognized by him, which is what everyone wants. Everyone wants that full recognition of who they are as a human being and a full recognition of their humanity.

I think that’s what social justice work is based on. My grandmother was a recluse, which may sound a little bit odd since she had seven children, but she basically didn’t leave her home. She kept a pad by her bed and would awaken in the night and write poems, and she worked on those poems in the day time and once a week she wrote a little newspaper article for the local paper, and so she was a poet. And she published — one of her children, her son, published a little volume of hers. Great poetry? No. But interesting commentary from the poetry and interesting commentary from those little articles of a very, very fine mind.

I think maybe she had had minimal elementary education — studied what everyone used to study from, I think it was called *McDuffy’s Reader*. And she loved words. She loved language. And she loved the natural world. And she was closer to my sisters than to I, because they were much older, but there are memories of her walking through the woods and having her identify flowers in the few times that she would get away from home.

So they were interesting people. My grandfather didn’t read [much.] My grandmother read, she wrote poetry, and she never worked outside the home. She was a worker in the home, raising these children.

ANDERSON: What region did they settle in?

PHARR: They lived in a little town called Elberton, Georgia, and lived in a tiny little house. I don’t think my brothers and sisters and I know whether they ever owned it or not. My grandfather was a huge gardener. That was his passion, to have a very large vegetable garden. That’s one of my great loves, so that comes to me from both sides of my family. So that’s my mother’s family. They were the Irish of the sort that loved to tell big stories, close to lies. They loved to sing and have fun and laugh outrageously. If you put them on the temperature range, they had a very warm temperature. Women were all sort of slightly round-bodied, and short, (laughs) short like myself, and had great fun — great, great fun. My mother had a harder life than some of the others did, which I will talk about later, but they always had this great humor.

And then my father’s family, also Scotch-Irish, had very cool temperatures — farmers, highly, highly, highly regarded in their community. My grandfather Pharr was — I think of him like Job, a righteous and upright man. How righteous he was, I don’t know, but that was my sense of him as a child. I was nine when he died. But his affect was of someone who wore white working pants and a white
working shirt, did not tolerate any profanity, did not tolerate injustice, did not tolerate laziness, lack of cleanliness — who sort of kept his family with, as they say, with an iron hand. And I don’t know where or how he was educated, but was a very big reader. All of the people in that family read tremendously.

My mother married into that family. They all lived on this farm, my grandfather and several of his sons who helped him farm. So she moves from a little town out into the country, where she’s accustomed to — this is 1919 — and she’s accustomed to running around with her friends, and she’s also worked very hard. Her mother had an accident where she tipped boiling lard off the stove onto her legs, which took the meat — the flesh — off, down to the bone, and my mother became the person who provided all the care for the family. So she had already had great responsibility.

So she marries into this family where — she’s accustomed, though, to this work, but also this great fun and laughter, and they had this very cool intellectual temperature. Their idea of fun on a Sunday afternoon was to sit on the front porch and read. (laughs) Her idea of fun — I guess in 1919 — her idea of fun was to get into an old car or wagon, buggy, go somewhere, do something. And so she raises, gives birth to her first seven children, all except for me, on that farm. She told stories of when her first child came that thunderstorms would come and she would be so terrified she would take my sister in her arms and run to the fields [to find my father.]

But she learned how you work, in a particular kind of way, from my [paternal] grandmother, who was a very, very sweet woman, very loving. [She was] known all of her life for never saying anything unkind about anyone. You have these simple stories about people’s lives. Well, she was known as someone whose central story was that when someone near her was commenting about someone who was really a rough character in our community — someone I think who had done great wrong, maybe crime, I don’t know — she said, “But you know, he was quite a beautiful baby.” And so I think that was the defining story of her character and personality. That was that family. In that family there were four boys, four girls, and then my mother and dad had four boys and four girls.

ANDERSON: What did your father’s father do for work — farming?

PHARR: He was a farmer. He dabbled a little bit in real estate. He went down to Florida for that land bubble. I don’t know quite how that happened. Came back, had a farm of some size. I think it was about 300 acres, which today is not very much, but I think at that time it was. And they all worked on it. They all worked like dogs. I mean, it was in the times where everything was done by hand; you made all the clothes, you washed by hand, you made butter by hand — same as in my childhood. My family lived the same way all the way up into the ’50s. There was this huge, huge work ethic that you work hard, you go to church, you try
to be as upright as you can. And of course everybody had their wild side except — let me just say, some of the children, (laughs) certainly in my family they all had a little bit of that. I don’t know so much about them, but every family has its stories. But they raised cotton. They raised corn, they raised wheat, they raised beans, that kind of thing. And then they produced everything that they ate within the family. An aunt of mine lost her husband. She became the person that did all the cooking, caring. She took in sewing.

ANDERSON: So what were the years like, do you think, when they lived with your grandparents? What are your mom’s stories or your siblings’ recollections about living in that home?

PHARR: They had a separate home there. I think they remember working hard. They worked very hard. My older sister, who is now 84, told me just recently that they felt like they were probably not much enjoyed by my grandparents — not that they disliked them, but they had a cool temperature. It wasn’t like, Oh, come in! Let’s eat. If you went to my maternal grandparents it was, What can I serve you? — and that was not the case with my father’s parents. But she said they used to go down to their house all the time and get their books and lie on the floor and read their books, and that was close by. And they remember my grandfather’s kind of uprightness, and their love of my grandmother. But they talk a lot about what fun they had with themselves, and they tell great stories about that, but in particular they talk about how much work there was to do.

ANDERSON: What were your jobs on the farm?

PHARR: Well, I started by carrying water to the people working in the fields. I brought in, I guess what would be pronounced stove wood, but we always called it “stow wood,” which is the wood you cooked in the kitchen stove, not the kind that’s used in the fireplace. I cared for the chickens, the hens. I was the person who fed them and brought in the eggs. And you know, you graduate.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Those were your youngest jobs, then?

PHARR: Yeah. You take a little can of kerosene and pick bugs off the potato and tomato plants and drop them in the kerosene. One of the central stories about me and my childhood is the brother just older than I am being afraid to go into the barn loft to throw the hay down for the mules, and so I would have to go because he was afraid of things like that, and I was — yeah, I was who I am. I was fearless then. I don’t know why. Who knows why that happens. I always say I turned him into a Republican anti-feminist. (laughs) I don’t know. I don’t think I made him love women. (laughs)
So I go with my sisters and my mother — it was a big thing at that time — I go with them to Rich’s in Atlanta. It was a very big thing to go into Atlanta to shop — wasn’t something you did very often, and you dressed up for it, and that was true for all of the South. Atlanta was this Mecca. One of the stories was, I was in an elevator with my mother and I guess one of my sisters and several women in their fur coats. And I look at my mother and I say, “What are we going to do? I’m not at home. Who will feed the mules tonight?” (laughs) This is very big in the family history. And my mother’s [horrified], of course. This little child who’s exposed to these people — abusive child labor is happening in her home! (laughs) [It was also a horror over the revelation of her class status.]

My mother had a very large garden. My dad would plow it and she would raise it. She canned all that we ate. She made all the clothes that we wore. She did all the washing. She did all the housecleaning. She did all of the care for the yard. She was responsible primarily for all of us kids getting all of our work done. She was also the disciplinarian in my family, because I think sometimes children who grow up under fairly authoritarian parents don’t like to do discipline. They either mimic that or they go the other way and say, Uh-uh, I’m not —

So my dad — he modeled behavior for us and gave us tremendous values. Always said to us very, very clearly that character is the most important thing. That what you wear does not matter, that what your character is and how you express that character through behavior is the most important thing. And it’s the way he lived his life. He was a very, very honorable, respected man. She was constantly working. She took in sewing. She sold butter and eggs. Just for these little bits of money. She would make the butter for us — this was hand churning — and then she would sell the remainder of it.

But in all of that, we had the most wonderful food. I think when you’ve really experienced poverty, it’s when you can’t have enough to eat and when your shelter is so inadequate. That’s when you [know] in sort of your deepest sense that we are so poor. Not just when you can’t buy something that you yearn [for] — and we had those things. We had adequate shelter. We had that land. We had food. It was very different from urban poverty, when you don’t have the option of growing that food or being in control of your shelter unless you have the right amount of money to pay for it, often where you might be homeless.

So while it was poverty, it wasn’t poverty on that level — I think it’s dishonest to sort of talk about poverty in one’s childhood when you’ve had so much good, in terms of the basic needs of life. And we had those. Could they buy everything they wanted and needed? No. Did they have to watch every penny that went out? Yes. Was that hard? Absolutely. But had all these other great things, which also may have seemed a bit greater from the standpoint of a child than it did for the parents, who were having to worry about [money], and who were having to have anxiety about it.
I got from them a great big work ethic. (laughs) I like to work. It gives me tremendous pleasure. My family, sitting in a room, looks for something to do — we’d look for something to do with our hands and we always don’t know what to do with our hands because we want to pick up something and work on it. We’re in three states, I guess. We’re either looking for something to do with our hands or we’re reading. And we’ll often be in each other’s company and reading. That’s how we are with one another. Or we’re telling stories.

ANDERSON: What was your relationship with your siblings like, as a child?

PHARR: There’s a huge span of age. My oldest sister was, I guess, 18 when I was born, so I have three older sisters and then four brothers. It took me a very long time to understand this, but my family used to always introduce us by saying — and then my siblings, as well as my parents — There are three girls, four boys, and Suzanne. (laughs) We always laughed about it. After a while it became clear to me that that was true, (laughs) that they had three girls, four boys, and whatever, whoever, this is. I basically grew up with the boys, but didn’t play with them much. I mostly played alone and with my animals. The boys were there. They played with each other. I played some with the brother just next to me. But as I said, we had that little bit of conflict about my being this kind of tough customer (laughs).

My sisters were what used to be known in the ’40s as working girls, which is different from what is meant now, but that meant that you went off, you got a secretarial course or you got a little bit of college or some kind of training, and you went to Atlanta and you worked as a secretary or in some position. And then you lived in a boarding house, and you went out, and if you could — once the war was over, you got your nylons and you’d get your manicure. You know, all of that. Working girls. It was something to aspire to. When you go home, it’s that period between being at home and getting married and when you’re kind of free and it was glamorous. And no matter what level of the income scale you were, it was glamorous. I was talking with a couple of African American friends of mine the other day and they were talking about when they were working girls and they went to New York and what fun they had. And I said, you know, “What kind of income were you on?” And they said, “Not much.” And I said, “That sounds like what my white sisters were.” They didn’t have much income, but they were free — it’s just, add a little glamour to it. You followed fashion the best you could, and some people [could] go buy their outfits, but you go home and imitate them and make them.

But there’s a piece in this that I’ve left out which is probably the most central, core moment for my family. After they moved to this little farm up in Hog Mountain, they had been there I guess, two years. I think I was just about two. My grandfather, besides having a farm he owned a mill. It was a grist mill. It’s the kind of mill where farmers take their corn and have it ground, and you have a mill pond with what’s
called a race that shoots the water into a very, very large wheel that
turns — it’s stone machinery inside — inside the mill. Very old. It had
been in our family a hundred years. And so my grandfather ran it. As
these farmers would come and bring that corn, he would keep a portion
of it. Then he sold that and that’s how he made part of his living.

And there had been a very, very terrible ice storm at that time — we
have ice storms in Georgia, but really it’s only occasionally we have
these really bad ones, and almost never get snow. This is northeast of
Atlanta, towards the mountains, kind of in the rolling hills where you
could see the Blue Ridge off in the distance. My dad went up with two
of my brothers to take a load of corn to be ground, and when he got
there the wheel was frozen. And so he said to my grandfather that he
would go out and chip the ice off the wheel, so he went out and was
chipping the ice and my understanding is the wheel was turned on. And
my grandfather, who was pretty deaf — I mean, seriously hearing
impaired — couldn’t hear my dad screaming.

A local teacher that my family loved — he and his wife both taught
us — had one of those moments that you hardly know what to make of,
but people talk about them all the time, where he had this deep sense
that he should go down there. He went down there and found my dad on
this wheel, turning. And so he took him off the wheel. And my brothers,
who were quite small at the time, tell the story that they knew that
something very terrible had happened, because my grandfather said,
“Oh, my God.” And that, in our family, was profanity. I mean, you
didn’t use anything in vain. You couldn’t say damn. My grandfather was
really quite stiff on that.

They went by my mother’s house, where I was just this little baby,
and my mother was down across the dirt road helping a woman give
birth to her baby. They drive up with my dad in the back seat. He’s cut
from here to here, from one side of his neck to the other. His ribs are
crushed. His leg is broken. Maybe his pelvis, I don’t remember. And
they take him to the local doctor, which is six miles away, and he says,
“All I can do is patch you up.” And my mother is in the back seat of the
car with my dad’s head in her lap, bleeding, blood everywhere. And so
they put him in the ambulance and — he was a veteran from the First
World War — they take him to the VA hospital in Atlanta, and they say,
We don’t think he’s going to live — that his lungs are crushed and he’s
in such terrible shape.

She stays there at his side for six weeks, waiting for him to die, or
live, but with basically the prognosis being that he would die. My sister
comes home, and there are two of them who come home to take care [of
us] — so we’re basically taken care of by my sisters. And then my dad
comes home from the hospital and he has a huge recovery. He can’t
farm. My mother, during that time, takes my brothers — my oldest
brother would’ve been maybe 12 or 13 — to the fields and farms. And
does the cooking. And does the canning. And does the washing.

When you think about women and women’s work and women’s
lives, she didn’t have that role in society as being seen as someone with
full authority and full capacity, because no woman did, but there she is, carrying on that farm and sustaining it during that time with what knowledge she has and these young boys to work with her. And I think it’s really quite an extraordinary story.

My dad, because he couldn’t farm, took a job in the saw mill. He was disabled in a particular way, because when he was at the VA they thought that if they set his leg, that it would just kill him, that he was so fragile. They hung this weight on the end of it, to stretch it out, which basically cut through his Achilles heel. So thereafter he not only had a leg that was shorter than the other, he had a hole in his ankle — in his heel — that every day bled. One of my memories of my father is his walking with a limp, and coming in every night and washing his wound and dressing it, and the next day going to the field.

After he stopped working at the saw mill and went back to the fields — working in fields that are plowed rows, where he’s walking on uneven ground like this, and still walking, and still working from six o’clock in the morning till six or seven at night. When I say work ethic [this is what I mean] — and these are the same two people who, then on Saturday, went to the church and cleaned the church, and on Sunday brought the preacher home and fed the preacher.

When I went to my dad’s funeral — at funerals you always have these moments of revelation, sometimes good and sometimes bad, and one of several for me at that time was when someone who I thought I had never seen who came up and said, “You know, you look just like your dad.” And he said, “From what I hear from you, you’re just like him.” And I said, “I don’t know what you mean.” He said, “Well, you know, when the church would be just faltering, your dad would walk across the fields to house after house and get 50 cents from them to keep it going.” And he said, “Ain’t that what you do?” And I said, “A little like that, yeah.” So our family in great ways is shaped by that accident that hits him at age — I guess he’s 47 at the time. He ends up eventually in his seventies having his leg amputated, because it becomes cancerous. But the shaping of what they could do and not do came out of that accident in that mill.

Just for an interesting jump to the future and how the South has gone under the bulldozer: after my grandfather had the mill, my Uncle George, who was the youngest person in that family — I have several men that I adore (laughs) that are family members. I have men that are not family members that I love, but these are men who just had extraordinary meaning in my life. My Uncle George was one of them. And he was my dad’s youngest brother. He worked at the mill, and then, I guess in the early sixties, I-85 was placed right beside it. He was a man of great individuality and independence, and he said he didn’t want to live that close to a freeway, so he sold the land. The mill went out of our family for the first time in however many years — a hundred-something years. Now, built all around that is the Mall of Georgia. And real estate there runs for sometimes two million and sometimes three million an acre. My family farm is only five miles, I guess, from that Mall of
Georgia. And as the emblem — [the Mall’s] symbol — outside it are mill wheels.

ANDERSON: So tell me about school for you.

PHARR: I went to school at age six. There was no kindergarten. I went to school out in the country, a little school house through eighth grade called Sunny Hill. It wasn’t much education. I was dying to go — already knew how to read and all of that, and so I couldn’t wait to get there, because I thought it’d be great to be around other kids. I really didn’t have anyone to play with, and I was kind of a loner. So I liked the social aspect of it. I had great fun.

I remember I got spanked the very first day for talking so much because I was so excited to be with all those people. You had to put your hands out and get beaten with rulers. It was all still into physical punishment of children. But we were taught by wives of farmers who had had a year or two of college. It wasn’t much those first eight years — I’d say it was pretty hit and miss. I had one teacher I thought was quite wonderful. But I was saved by coming from this family that read. I mean, what we did, every night, was my mother sat on her chair and sewed. My dad sat on a chair and read, and my brothers and I lay on the floor and read. That’s what we did every night.

I played lots with boys. I played with both girls and boys. If anybody had a little car, we’d play forever on these [dirt banks] — we had no playground equipment. We had a ball and a bat that we could play softball with. We had no swings, anything like that. We had this [red clay] playground. So we would run. The girls would make hopscotch squares and the boys would play with these little cars, and I spent a lot of time playing with those little cars. Then in sixth grade I started playing basketball, which was my life. That was on a dirt court at that school. Several of us were really good and really bonded with each other.

Then I went from there into high school, and the three of us went right into playing high school basketball, which gave us kind of an entrée into high school, which was in town — which we wouldn’t have had otherwise. We would’ve had much more struggle. There wasn’t as much education in the area. It was pretty limited.

I don’t have very many complaints about my childhood — I’ve worked for years in the women’s anti-violence movement, and I’ve just been in the presence of so many people who have suffered so much in their childhood. Mine was not perfect, but I was so fortunate not to have abusive parents. My mother’s theory of relationship was that the parents should put their love for each other first, and their children second. And I remember hearing her advise my Aunt Mary, who married my Uncle George, to do that, she said, “because this is what makes children secure.” She said, “It will make you happy, the two of you happy, and it’ll make the children feel protected.” Where she learned this, I don’t know.
Let me just say one other thing about my mother and her hard work and her taking my brothers to the fields. One of the statements she made — I think it’s a strong statement related to how we’ve come to understand women and how we’ve come to understand feminism, and she used to say, “If I had a choice — if I had life to go over and were given a choice, I would be a man.” Now this is a working woman who [was happily married.] She didn’t finish high school because she came out of high school to care for her mother when she had that terrible burn, and what she so clearly meant by that [statement] had nothing to do with sexuality. What she meant about that was that she would have some authority and power. But she said it dozens and dozens of times, that if she could have it all over — and it was one of her not teasing times.

But she also used to tease. I would say to her, “Oh. You had a lot of children. So, did you decide to have this many children, or how many would you really preferred to have had?” And she’d always just look at me and say, “Four.” (laughter) That’s something to me. That’s why I don’t know whether it was true or not, but she would always laugh, because it meant I wouldn’t be there.

END TAPE 1
ANDERSON: Let’s talk about race and sort of the demographic makeup of the region that you were living in, your town, your school, the conversations that you had in your family about race and your understanding of it as a young person.

PHARR: Well, my childhood was a little different from, probably, some of the Southerners that you’ve interviewed in that I grew up in a white community. I don’t know that I was around any African Americans except when I went to town and I saw people. I didn’t actually have experiences with them. We were enough northeast of Atlanta — there was a small black community, but it hadn’t been the place of slavery, and so there was a different number. I was aware that this part of town existed, but I wasn’t aware of anything except hearing what people said, things like, Don’t put that money in your mouth because someone — they didn’t say black, but Nigra — may have had it in their hands: those racist things that you almost didn’t even note as part of consciousness.

[This is one story of my lack of race consciousness and unexamined privilege. I hope it shows that people can change, regardless of where they begin.]

ANDERSON: It was just in the air?

PHARR: It was just in the air. It was just like someone saying [about] this white guy who used to walk by our house all time, that he’s an old drunkard — these things that I would, as a child, would hear, but not have the full consciousness of what they meant. Also knew that on the farm that my grandfather had that there was a black family that lived there that worked for him. And so, they had all these pictures of him, [a black farmer] — particularly with my older sister, and the family with her, and this relationship they seemed to have. I’ve heard stories about what they said and what they did, and all of those sounded like folk stories.

For the longest time, I didn’t know anything much. Of course there were no black children in my school, and even if there’d been integration there wouldn’t have been because I was way out in the country. Certainly was nothing taught in the schools. So I had, for someone who lived in the deep South, limited experience. I began to, in the late ’40s — or probably it isn’t the late ’40s, probably closer up into the ’50s — began, of course, to hear all the rumblings of the civil rights movement. The place that that was expressed the most for me was in our church, a little Methodist church that I went to, which had an explosion over it when there wasn’t even a black person knocking at the door to integrate. But the church split.

My father fell on the states’ rights side, so the conversations at our dinner table were always placed out as, People should not be told what they have to do; I’ve always been good to black people. The framing was constantly the same: I would never do harm, but people
should not be told what to do. I think that was probably a lot of framing for people who considered themselves kind of church folks, I don’t know.

I think that being out in that white farm community, we just didn’t have that [same consciousness,] so I think I grew up with the same racial prejudices that everybody grew up with with similar inexperience to me. Maybe people grew up with some different ones who actually lived among African Americans, I don’t know. But I think for me, I think mine were probably pretty standard, that these are the standard prejudices [of white privilege and ignorance]: these were people that might need to be free someday, but they’re not capable of being free, or have to be brought along, or all of that. And also that sense of superiority, that sense of, Well, clearly, white people know what to do, because haven’t we created this world? That we were clearly more skilled, more civilized, I mean, all of those things. It wasn’t until I went to college that I saw the Klan.

ANDERSON: And then what happened when the Brown decision came down? You were still in school then? Yeah, you were in high school.

PHARR: Oh, yeah. That was my high school years.

ANDERSON: So, tell me about that.

PHARR: I heard very little about it. There was controversy at my dinner table about it, in my family, but other than that it was not discussed in our school. You know how today, if you had a social studies course and something like that came down, you’d be talking about it. Not us. We had a teacher sitting in the front of the room reading from an old textbook, every day. There was no sense of, Here’s something that happened that is threatening to us.

I knew that the Klan was around, though. And the way I knew the Klan existed was occasionally on your windshield or somewhere on your car would be a piece of paper, which would be propaganda from them. I remember having once thought while I was in high school, Well, I wonder if my dad’s a member — because you didn’t know. You didn’t know.

ANDERSON: Yeah. What do you think now, in hindsight?

PHARR: I don’t know. I don’t know. He would never have told. It would seem shocking to me if he were. It would also seem complicated. It’s sort of like I can’t imagine my dad ever being able to kind of slip out to do the things that they did. We always knew were he was, we thought. He and my mother went places. He didn’t go places on his own.

And I’ve had people ask me, Did your father ever have affairs, or your mother? I say, Well, who would they have had them with? (laughter) I don’t know. They went to church together. They went to
meetings together. They went to town together. We lived way out in the
country on this little farm. I’m sure it could’ve been possible, but it
wasn’t in my little teenage pea brain, (laughs) though. I was too busy
trying to figure out myself, I think, my sexuality and how to be a better
basketball player.

ANDERSON: Let’s go back and talk about sexuality a bit. You’ve written that it’s
something that you knew about yourself at a fundamental level, that you
were somehow different. So describe those early feelings of difference,
from your peers and your family.

PHARR: I didn’t have a consciousness that I was separate because of my
sexuality. I certainly knew as a child that I was very attracted to girls
and boys. I knew that from the time I went to school. I think I knew —
see, I didn’t know any of the language. I’ve written about that some. I
had never heard the word homosexual. Of course I had never heard of
the word gay or lesbian. I never heard the word queer. I hadn’t even
heard the epithets. But I think I knew enough not to let anybody know
that I was attracted to girls and messing around with girls. But I didn’t
do the boy part as a cover. First, second, third grade I just played with
these little boys and hugged on them. Whatever anybody was doing, I
was. What I knew and I didn’t understand was gender, more than
sexuality.

Sexuality is such a different thing, as I understand now. It’s certainly
possible to be attracted to males and females. I never thought myself to
be a bisexual, but I have often thought, and I’ve talked many times with
many different people about this: if the world were free, if there were no
constraints, I think sexuality would be very fluid. It’s pretty fluid now,
but it’s secret. You know, except for people who are willing to try to go
more public. I don’t even know if we would have any of the categories
we have now. I don’t know if there’d be such a thing as gay and lesbian
or bi and trans. People would be sexual. I don’t think we can even
envision that. We don’t have a language to talk about it. It’s a big thing
to imagine, what that would be like. Gender and gender roles put such
pressure on sexuality, so that you get those exclusively. I knew that
gender wasn’t quite right with me.

Before I went to school I was begging for my next door neighbor’s
boy’s hand-me-downs. We all had hand-me-downs, and I didn’t have
sisters to hand them down. They had little girls that could have them,
that were friends. But I wore his clothes lots and lots and lots. My father
was always fine with me working in the way a boy would work, and I
basically did a boy and eventually a man’s work on the farm.

When he, after my freshman year in college, had to have his disc
operated on, his back [was injured] from this uneven walking, I ran our
farm for the summer. We had two houses of chickens. I ran the tractor. I
did everything. I went to the farmers’ market in Atlanta. I carried a gun
with me. This was 1958.
ANDERSON: Why the gun?

PHARR: Because it was dangerous and I was by myself. Had to go out in a pickup truck full of butterbeans and sell them, and my uncle said, “You should take my gun.” So I took his gun. And back in that time I also used to hunt. That was the first time where I’d ever been in relation to a gun where I thought it would be for self-defense. We had a houseful of guns. Nobody ever talked about them or used them in that way. We never locked our house. They all hunted. My brothers hunted. I hunted. I know there’s a very changed world around that, but it was very much a part of the culture I grew up in. And then, you know, now, in my adult life: I’ve been in situations far, far more dangerous than that, and I would never have — well, I say never — I don’t have a gun and I don’t believe in keeping guns.

Anyway, so I ran the farm. I would go to the hospital and take instructions from him and go home and do them. It was tremendous physical work, and I was very strong physically. And he couldn’t stand it. He just couldn’t stand it that I was a woman doing that. And often when I was in high school, I would be doing some job that would be particularly a hard job, and he was always [saying], “Girls shouldn’t do that.” And I was doing it and it needed to be done. He struggled on that, and my mother and I struggled mightily on gender. But I didn’t understand that. I thought we were struggling, probably, on sexuality. This whole movement around gender has been very helpful to me.

I’ve always been so rebellious. I think it’s the basis of my social change work that I rebelled against all authority from the time — in the same year, they showed us in school some kind of little film. They used to bring occasional films, and this was on the crucifixion of Christ. It wasn’t such a big subject back then in the ’40s about whether you had religion at school. So here we are — we played every day, you know. We did all this stuff. Sang church songs, did it all. (laughs) You can see what a great effect it had on me. I saw that film and it had all of the crosses and the great thunder and this and that. So I go home. I just go up to my mother and I say, “That couldn’t have happened. There is no way that could’ve happened.” She says to me, “I don’t want ever to hear you again, ‘I doubt Jesus. And I doubt God.’ Never.” Of course, you know where that sent me. (laughs) Lost it all right there. (laughs) It was like, Uh-uh, I don’t believe this. This is phony. It’s made up.

That’s off the gender thing, but that would be the kind of gender battle. When I got in college, it was interesting. We didn’t wear pants to school or to college. She was making my skirts, and I asked her if she would put pockets down on them just above my knees, where, if you put your hands down, they would be almost all the way down. She didn’t. I have a picture of myself somewhere here with these pockets way down. Nobody had pockets down on their skirts like that. So she made that effort. She struggled with me on the sewing to make these things — she made me some real femme things and I have pictures of myself in
those, that I wore because she made them for me. I did a lot of things to compromise with her because — we all rebelled against her because she was the person who had to discipline us.

It was those kinds of battles. More around clothes and the fact that — I didn’t have this as a conscious concept, I don’t think, but I was so determined to be free. I was so determined to be. It both terrified her and excited her, I think.

ANDERSON: Were you sexually active with girls when you were a teenager, when you were in high school?

PHARR: Mm-hmm. My first real girlfriend was a cheerleader when I was a freshman in high school. I was a basketball player and she was a cheerleader. That’s kind of classic, isn’t it? (laughter) And then we double dated with the two stars of the football team, and then we would go home at night together, she and I. Well, here again, that’s where I didn’t have language. So you knew, but you didn’t tell anybody. You knew that girls could spend the night with each other and boys couldn’t, and you’re not to let any of that out. That’s all we knew. We knew it was illicit.

ANDERSON: Did you know anybody else who was doing the same thing?

PHARR: Uh-uh. But you know they were. (laughs) I do now. I’ve met some of my friends who said they were involved with folks in high school, but I didn’t have a clue. I was much more engaged with friends of mine who were getting pregnant and not knowing what in the world they were going to do. Disappearing to go visit their distant aunt — that was in the day of the Florence Crittenden homes and just broken-hearted people.

ANDERSON: Did you imagine after high school that the two of you could have a life together?

PHARR: It never occurred to me. No. I’ve been a marriage resister since I was a kid. Now I don’t know why, but I’ve said all the way from the time I was young I would never get married. I still stay with that. (laughs) I’m still holding strong. (laughs) I think I’m going to down with that one. I’m not going to do it. I’m going to take that one to the grave. But I always thought it was a really bad idea. This is before I ever knew anything about anything close to feminism. Yeah.

ANDERSON: So tell me how you ended up in the college that you did. Was it a given that that you would go to college?

PHARR: No, not all. Being rebellious (laughter) — my high school had its first ever college day — you know these days where you have the colleges come over and talk? It was over at the Methodist church, and I was there with one of my girl buddies, and we thought, this is too boring, and we
were going to slip out. Here’s living in contradiction again. We were both the bad girls and the good girls in our same bodies. I think many people carry so many different things in their same being.

So we’re slipping out the back door and here comes down the stairs from the Sunday school room, what we thought was an old gentleman — again, probably 50 or 60. And he said, “Oh, you were coming up to see me.” And we said, Oh, yeah. So we go up, because we couldn’t bear to say no to him. And also, we were about to be caught from (laughs) slipping out. And he says, “If you’ll come to the women’s college” — at that time it was Georgia State College for Women; it changed its name right after we got there — “if you’ll come to GSCW” — then in Milledgeville — “I’ll give you a scholarship.” And it’s like a hundred dollars. It sort of entered our minds, Oh, maybe we should do that.

And I had thought before I might go up to North Georgia College, which is this old military college up in the mountains where this boy I was going with was going. My aunts had gone there [to GSCW.] My grandfather on my father’s side educated his daughters and not his sons — very unusual. He said he did it so that they could care for themselves if they didn’t have husbands.

ANDERSON: Wow. That’s very forward-thinking.

PHARR: And backward, because you have a man like my father who should not have been a farmer. Had such a fine mind. Would’ve made a great mathematics teacher or history teacher or a pastor, and instead he was kind of a very so-so farmer — struggled to be a farmer. Would’ve been great if he had educated both. That would’ve been very forward-thinking, saying that my daughters need an education as much as my sons. But anyway, they had gone there.

So I go home and I tell my mother and she says no. You know, “We can’t afford to send you. You should go take a secretarial course and go to Atlanta, and that way you’ll meet someone. You can get married.” She was very much on you meet somebody nice. It doesn’t matter whether you love them or not, you can learn to love them if they’re nice, and then you raise a family and you try to move up the class ladder to be middle class. That was pretty much her thing for me. And I said, “No, I think I’m going to do this.” That’s when I went through the struggle with my dad to get the loans.

So I went to this little college of 600 in Milledgeville. It was a women’s college. Set up mostly for the daughters of shopkeepers and farmers, and so it was sort of a lower-middle-class [college]. And most of the faculty was female, of course, lots of it. It came from being the old Georgia Normal that so many places had, where women went to learn to teach or nurse, and then became Georgia State College for women, and then became Georgia College before I left, and now is — no, and then it became the Women’s College of Georgia, and now it’s Georgia College, which is co-ed. It was filled with these strong women and closeted lesbians. I didn’t know that. I had these great English
faculty members. I went thinking, Well, I’ll major in P.E. I’m a
basketball player. Or I’ll major in psychology. I didn’t have a brain in
my head. I’d been kind of a fair student in high school, because I was
just bored to tears and mostly got in lots of — I get there and I’m so
rebellious that I’m almost thrown out two or three times, and doing –

ANDERSON: For doing what?

PHARR: Oh, talking back. Refusing to do things I’m asked to do. Refusing to fill
out forms I’m told to fill out. They made us all do this money class and I
was supposed to talk about — this was part of your orientation — to
talk about the money your family had and your own personal — and I
refused to do it, because I was this country girl. I had all this pride. You
didn’t do this. Then I’d be sent to the dean and the dean would talk to
me and say what I had to do and the rules I had to follow. Then I got
involved with a teacher, who was part of the lesbian network there, that
I didn’t know was a lesbian. And so everything I did was observed,
seen, whatever, and it was indeed –

ANDERSON: How’d you get involved with the teacher?

PHARR: She took me on — I guess, deliberately — as a work/study. I worked as
a secretary in the day time and then a waitress at night to go to school,
which was, you know, like two hours in the day of secretarial and three
hours at night waitressing. She took me on as that and started with
flirting. She was in her thirties. I got in this whole life of secrecy and
slipping off campus, taking trips. My sister somehow got wind of it, I
don’t know how. We had a very big blow-up around it. She told me at a
family gathering that there wasn’t room in the family for me. There
were some rough spots like that, but it was interesting. There were lots
of lesbians on that campus, but nobody was open. And all of these P.E.
teachers, in particular, and some of the English, these women would live
together. They had apartments in the dormitories, and they lived
together as big old couples. Like my favorite teacher. I just adored this
woman. The story that’s passed down, class by class, was that she had
been so in love with this man and he’d been killed in the Second World
War. Well, how many people have told that story? (laughs) Clearly she
was involved with this older woman she lived with.

I had heard the word homosexual then, my first year, when
someone called me one, and I was horrified. I also was threatened about
it. I got letters that were anonymous letters. I got anonymous letters that
threatened my status in school and then I got anonymous letters that
made contributions to me being able to stay in school financially. Never
knew who any of them were. I was always feeling like I was within a
second of being found out. I finally kind of pulled away — managed to
pull away from this one teacher, because she had so much control over
my life. She was friends with and socialized with the dean and all these
other people, whether they were all lesbian or not, but it was very clear
that my well-being was not in my own hands.

ANDERSON: Did you managed to end that relationship while you were still a student
without any repercussions?

PHARR: Well, no. I didn’t get thrown out of school, but it was dicey. It was
definitely dicey. So I have a lot of feeling for closeted people. What that
made me feel like was I didn’t want to be in any relationships with
anybody. By then it was increasingly clear to me that I was a lesbian,
and I felt like I was so filled with torment and emotion and danger, so I
just thought, I’m just not going to do it. I’m not it. I’m not going to do
it. Of course that didn’t last so long, but it lasted awhile, where I just
held myself distant from everybody. I just put my sexuality back in and
just held myself distant, which meant distant in every way, because
what you give up is being able to be authentic.

So it’s this whole different level of being this enormous loss. It’s not
just you’re not out having sex or you’re not having a girlfriend. It’s that
you can’t talk about yourself. I added that on top of being fairly
reserved. It diminished possibilities for genuine human connection, and
it extremely diminished possibilities of real connection with my family,
because what did I tell them about my life? I spent years writing them
letters. I was really good about communicating with them, but I’d tell
them two inches out of a 12-inch day.

I was also in terror during that time. I represented so much, a lot of
the hopes and dreams of my family, because I was going to school and I
was going to be a university teacher. I got into graduate school. I stood
to lose that great big family. I stood to lose that whole farming
community. I stood to lose everything that I knew.

That’s when I started the practice of keeping 500 miles between me
and my family, as a zillion queers in this country do and have done. You
miss, then, all of the major events of the family, unless you can travel
back there. When you travel back there you’re not an intimate, because
you can’t really talk about your life. And people, I’m sure, kind of know
about your life, but they don’t know about your life. I would’ve lost my
job in a second.

I come out of there and I teach at a community college, Young
Harris, which is a Methodist college. That’s after my first year of
graduate school. Then I go back to another year of graduate school,
come out of that. I finish my master’s, come out of that, and teach at a
women’s college, Mary Washington College. I started teaching at these
high danger places. It’s a lot of stuff. The story of my twenties is a story
of raging everything — raging rage, raging emotions, raging hormones,
raging ideas, activities, and the effort to suppress my authenticity as a
lesbian.

ANDERSON: What did your experience at college add to your understanding of
sexuality? You said that you learned the word homosexual for the first
time because it was used against you, and then you also met women who were older than you who had been living, albeit a closeted one, but life — a queer life, a lesbian life. What new dimension did that add to your understanding of your own sexuality?

PHARR: Well, it offered a couple of things: possibility — but it also wasn’t super attractive, it wasn’t as attractive as reading *Leaves of Grass*. Through those experiences, I found literature. I’d read all my life, but I became a student of literature at that time. These teachers were so powerful and so wonderful. They literally just took the world and opened it wide, like this. I went from being this little kid from Hog Mountain, Georgia, who’s held together by basketball, to this person that had a sense that there was a world and it was extraordinary. I could travel it through my mind. I could travel it some with my body. It opened up huge possibilities of freedom. And at that time, there was a woman there who was head of the YWCA. Now I don’t know why we had a YWCA in that college. I don’t know if they had them in all the colleges then, or what. She’s the one who moved a lot of us to get involved in civil rights. Her name was Izzie. I can’t remember her last name. Wonderful woman. That’s when I saw my first Klan march.

Now, I didn’t get involved in the way other people did who actually went out and got involved in organizing directly with African Americans, but she organized us through study groups. That’s when the state of Georgia was trying to determine whether to integrate schools or just close them down, and Lester Maddox was around and it was a very vicious time. She organized us on the school issue, and so we would go and make testimonials and organize around that. That was another place of really opening the possibility that I knew about organizing efforts through church, but I didn’t know about it in this other sense, that she introduced us [to]. We had all these people opening these possibilities. It was electrifying for me. When your mind is electrified at that age, then usually your sexuality’s electrified. They’re just hand in hand. It’s the grand thing about being between 18 and 21. People find that problematic with college students, but it is the most extraordinary time when those things have the good fortune to happen simultaneously. It becomes mind, body, and spirit. Whether you name it [or not] that is all of your emotions and all this intellectual stuff and your hormones and your sexuality on the move.

It was great, but it gave me torment in terms of thinking about my sexuality. I just didn’t know where to place it. Where was I going to have a place where I could have those worlds, where I could have this sort of passionate commitment to my mind. I loved teaching. I was just wild about it and knew that I was going to be successful. I had already had tremendous success with leadership in college and even with my iffy career.

I just couldn’t figure out how I was going to put all of those together, and I hated with every fiber of my body having to be dishonest. I was in such conflict, I can’t tell you. I hated it with a
passion. If there was anything that I held up high, it was this notion of character and integrity that I had gotten from my family, and here was the one issue that made me unable every day to have it. I was in this kind of torment of, How do you fashion a life of integrity when you have this part of your being that is seen as — actually that’s not the question. It was, How do you fashion a life of integrity when you can’t have your whole life be integrated, really, was the question.

ANDERSON: Was religion a part of the torment for you at this time?

PHARR: The community that I knew that religion was part of, no. I didn’t care a hoot. I was actually in mortal combat with God. I was more like the dark sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins. I didn’t believe in God and at the same time was in some sort of combat with that, with people, with the notion of God, and felt fiercely about it, was really adamant about it. That community that I so appreciated that had been formed out of the church and I felt that had given me my values: I had some ability to sort my love and appreciation for them and my values and the things that I disliked so much about institutionalized religion and my lack of belief in the actual source of it. I had a huge — probably through my teens and up until early thirties — had real fierce emotions about that.

But the stronger thing was how — I did not know how to be whole, and yet I had such great intellectual passion for wholeness. I read so many different people. I was in love with existentialism. I was a person who prided herself in honesty and lied every day, every day of my life. Either by omission or commission, I lied. And that was just about an unbearable state of being. If I had been in today’s culture, I think — in part of today’s culture, not the whole culture of the theocratic right and that kind of thing, but of the culture of drugs and alcohol and the way it is today, I probably would’ve been pretty self-damaging, I think. I don’t know what held me back from that. I was like many people of the ’60s and ’70s in doing some drugs and alcohol but not much — probably because my family not having much of a tradition of being really engaged in that, but I think I was rootless in some way. That here I was, a person with tremendously deep roots. I had deep roots in my family. I had deep roots in my church. I had deep roots in the community that I came from, and felt floating out there somehow in the world because I couldn’t put all those things together.

You can see why I write about why coming into the women’s movement was more than just, Isn’t this great. I mean, it really gave me my life. It was so weird: we talked endlessly about the personal and the political. It just like took my life and said, Here. Here’s ways you can be whole. Now that was not without struggle, but to find something that can make you make sense of yourself and your environment, in a life-saving way, is extraordinary.

ANDERSON: One of the things that Minnie Bruce [Pratt] and some others have said — I think Amber Hollibaugh says this too — is that not only does
feminism give you your life and it gives you this freedom and a new way to understand yourself, but it also allows you to go home in a way you couldn’t have imagined before.

PHARR: That’s right. That’s right.

END TAPE 2
ANDERSON: Today we’re going to cover your movement into women’s liberation and social justice organizing. I guess that starts with your trip to New Zealand. So why don’t you talk about why you were — you call it “exiled” — for a couple of years, and what you came back to find.

PHARR: I think the political part started with doing some civil rights work while I was in college, but [I was] still pretty muddy politically — not having this kind of incisive political analysis and direction. But one of the things I was doing — always had instincts towards women’s power and women’s strength — and one of the things I was doing was that when I went to graduate school, I studied nineteenth-century literature under a particular professor, and I was also studying modern poetry and the novel. I’ve been terrifically informed by literature. Probably my two major places of learning are from reading novels and direct experience, as opposed to reading nonfiction or studying. Those have been my sources. You’re studying nineteenth-century American literature, you’re right in the middle of the first wave of the women’s movement and you’re right in the middle of slavery and the abolitionist movement, and so those informed a lot of my thinking. Then I was teaching in the ’60s [at] Mary Washington College, and had a friend there who had come from Vassar and was very sort of tuned into what was happening in terms of feminism and was teaching Betty Freidan’s book, which was out at that time.

There were conversations that were happening at Mary Washington. Of course we were a little bit on the fringe from what you would think of as the mainstream, there. I was being influenced by that and being in yet another women’s college, these issues were raising up. I was involved in antiwar activities. But what led me out of the country was — I had two reasons. I actually intended to expatriate to New Zealand.

ANDERSON: And why New Zealand?

PHARR: Well, stupid reasons. (laughs) In some ways, my girlfriend and I pulled it out of our ear. We wanted some place that was very far away from home, some place were we could feel a little bit pioneering. Little did we know it was a small England. We were sort of running for our lives in order to be together. We left because [of] our deep upset about the Vietnam War. This whole country was just in a state of destabilization, and we weren’t deeply involved in the civil rights movement, we were working on the fringes of it. But the war was there.

But the primary reason was that her father had discovered that she and I were involved with one another and had ripped her out of the school, sent her to another university, put her under psychiatric care, forced her to join a sorority, forbade her to ever see me again. And so we made a run for it, to have different lives. It was the only way that we could see having our lives. That was kind of the beginning to try to
move together to try to figure out some way to be totally and clearly a lesbian. It was the first time I had also ever thought about having a life with someone. Before, I had been engaged with people sexually and emotionally, but not in the sense of I was going to have a life with someone. I was very much in love with her, and her with me, and so we did that.

New Zealand’s a very insular place, as you would expect. Dr. King was killed and Bobby Kennedy, and it was just too far away for everything. At that time you could, for the same price of ticket, either come back through Hawaii to the U.S. or you could go around the world, as long as you stayed in a forward progression. We did that.

And going to Calcutta was a huge political changing point for me, where I experienced poverty. I thought that people I knew had been poor, and I hadn’t really experienced poverty to that level. The combination of Dr. King, Bobby Kennedy, and Calcutta made me feel that I was going to come back and dedicate my life to social change. A great sort of luck or fortune is that I basically stepped off that plane in 1969 into the women’s movement. You could feel it before then. I didn’t know anything at that point about Stonewall or even shortly thereafter, but I came off that plane with the intention to go to Tulane to finish up my degree.

So I moved to New Orleans. It was like it was in other places, it was just moving through that campus and through that town. And there were these extraordinary women who were engaged in it. As you know from all the histories that you’ve taken, we were building it out of our own hands. Communication in an age in which there was no Internet and an age in which communication was mostly by newsletters and telephones and written letters — word was just electric and rapid.

I think we were doing the same things that people elsewhere were doing, which is what happens in movements. That communication just flies, you know. So we were creating a women’s center. We were creating a women’s newspaper. I and another friend created the first consciousness-raising group there. I and three or four other friends created our first women’s living collective that we lived in, a housing collective. We began to do street theatre, all of the guerilla theater. We had all of these strategies for change. We were desperately trying to figure out race and class, but constantly in action, constantly in motion.

That for me was an extraordinary time. I think you and I talked about this briefly yesterday off camera: there’s nothing like being between the age of 18 and 35 and have the confluence of sexuality and politics. I know people have written about that in the civil rights movement from a more heterosexual point of view, but in this it was women being able to have a place where they could come out and where they could discover their sexuality and discover their politics at the same time, and express their sexuality and express their politics at the same time, and have avenues for expression. So it was a great place.

We had a women’s bar, a women’s bar and restaurant that was a political place. There were other women’s bars, old women’s bars that
were there. But there was this new one that a woman named Barbara Scott created, and it was a wonderful, wonderful place. I believe, and I can hardly remember, but I think it was called the Tapestry. People converged on that. We had endless conversations, as you can imagine. The consciousness-raising group I was in was transformative for all of us. We were in it a couple of years together, and that was once a week, talking for about two hours, and –

ANDERSON: You have this very moving piece in your intro to *Homophobia*, talking about that CR group and talking about how you went to a couple of meetings and you weren’t out and it was the first time you said publicly, I’m a lesbian. And I think you say they were all straight women in that group, and you had a really positive, open, embracing response?

PHARR: Well, here I was, one of the people who formed that group, and I kind of mark that moment where I regain my integrity [because], after a couple of meetings, it was very clear that if we were going to talk about our lives, we have to talk about our lives. That for me was the first time ever I had said in a public space, “I am a lesbian.” And I did it with trepidation in my heart. Because, as far as I knew, all of these women were heterosexuals, and I knew that I couldn’t be authentic and it’d be a meaningless group. Everybody else would be having this experience of telling the truth about their lives, because that’s what consciousness-raising groups were all about. They were for many people, for the first time ever, saying, This is what happened. This is how it felt. This is my experience.

And to understand that the authenticity of one’s experience is what gives us genuine politics. If you could get those genuine experiences from a large number of people and if they cut across race and class and age, then we would have a politic that we could live with. It was also in that time when we all began doing hotlines, not just for women to call in to talk about general things, but particularly for violence. And then there was anti-rape work that came out of that. There were tremendous fun things. You know, we used to do guerilla theatre around bridal fairs. We all dressed up and went out and did street theatre in front of those, and it was great fun and some of it was really fierce like that, really funny. But we were constantly in the streets. And at the end of four years of that, I was exhausted. That’s because there were times when — like the newspaper, I would be sort of carrying it on my own back.

ANDERSON: And you were the editor of the newspaper, right?

PHARR: I was. Barbara Scott had started it and I was one of the editors later, yeah.

ANDERSON: And tell me what kind of material — what was in the paper? Can you give me typical columns or editorials?
PHARR: Yeah, you know, I wish I had all those papers. They would make interesting archives. Somebody must have them somewhere. One can only hope. Ti-Grace Atkinson or some of those great people out of New Orleans and out of Louisiana. We covered political issues, you know, issues of violence, issues of rape, those kinds of things. We also covered women’s lives. It was much less event coverage than it was thought coverage and kind of internal-change coverage, and then how we could politicize ourselves to take action. It was a good newspaper.

ANDERSON: How about in terms of sexuality and class and race? What do you remember about coverage of lesbians or African Americans?

PHARR: You know, I don’t remember much about either. I’m sure if I went back and read them, it’d be way more coverage of lesbians than it would be African Americans, although there was an effort of people trying to figure out how to move in that way, in that way meaning how it would not just be a white women’s movement. It would be a movement that was related to and expressive of African American women’s lives. And there were African American women involved, but not in large numbers. That was pretty indicative of the times as well, although there was consciousness around it and discussion, and efforts to create antiracist activities. Consciousness and activities are good, but go only as far as your consciousness goes. If you don’t have the full consciousness of equality then you never move to the place where you need to be, because it takes not only the full consciousness of equality, it takes the full consciousness of the inequity of history and figuring out how to overcome that, which I’ll talk a little bit about when we talk about the Women’s Project.

ANDERSON: One of the things that struck me also about that brief anecdote that you give about coming out to that consciousness-raising group is that their response — I think your line is [that] they say, Tell us what that is like. And so it signifies that that was a very warm and embracing response. That’s not typical for a lot of lesbians involved in the early women’s movement.

PHARR: No.

ANDERSON: Does that reflect your general experience in those days with the larger women’s movement?

PHARR: No. And it doesn’t reflect it at all. I’ve used that many, many times in workshops, when I’ve worked particularly with parents who say, I just don’t know what to say to my child. What would I do if my co-worker says I’m a lesbian? And I just say that, for me, is the best answer you could ever give: Tell me what that’s like. That’s true for any time that someone’s telling you something that you don’t know, and is counter to your experience. Instead of saying, Oh my God, or Poor dear, or
whatever you’re feeling about those things, just gather from them what
their humanity is, what their experience is.

But no, because you know the National Organization for Women
was then developing, and though it was a cover and it felt in some ways
not intentionally a cover, it provided a place where women could go and
come out. It had no room really for open lesbians, and many of us were
more or less purged from it at the time. So not everybody was saying,
Tell me what your experience is. There was that terror that was running.
But, you know, it’s also at that time you’re beginning, just beginning, to
get the development of things like the Moral Majority and Eagle Forum
and Concerned Women for America, so there’re currents that you’re not
even aware of that are moving simultaneously.

So I left there to go to Arkansas. And I went and lived in Arkansas
for a summer. This seems to be a little bit of a history of my life. I go
for a summer because I met a couple of women who had a farm there,
and they said, Come spend the summer on our farm — way out in the
country, old log house. You’ll love it. And I thought, you know, I’m so
tired, and really, when you’re doing so much activity on so many
different levels — also, I’d just been fired for being a lesbian at the
school where I taught.

ANDERSON: Oh, well say more about that before you jump into Arkansas then.

PHARR: Oh, OK. Well, I went to Tulane to finish — I was going to finish a
Ph.D. I’d been going there in the summers while I was at Mary
Washington College, and I got deeply involved in the antiwar
movement and was on the streets with that as well as the women’s
movement, so I had two things going, and they converged. I was
constantly on the streets and I felt that what was happening in academia
was not where I wanted to be. I didn’t think it was as relevant to my life
as was great intellectual and physical and emotional activity that was
happening in my organizing.

So I took a job at the Country Day School as an English teacher
there, and also hired some friends of mine to work there as well from
the graduate school. And it was a very privileged sort of place. I don’t
do very well sometimes with issues of class, so it was a good place for
me to learn some things. I was working to organize the faculty and also
was out as a lesbian. Those two things didn’t combine well for the
people in charge there, so they fired me, basically said that I was not
appropriate for the school.

So all of that left me — I was pretty tired. So I thought I would go to
Arkansas and spend the summer and write the great American novel. I
went to Arkansas, spent the summer, packed up all of my stuff in my
VW camper — it was early ’70s — and moved to Arkansas.

ANDERSON: Had your relationship survived? The one that you went to New Zealand
and came back with?
PHARR: We were in that relationship for about eight years, but it has a longer story. It survived through her death three years ago, in many ways.

ANDERSON: So you were single and going to Arkansas?

PHARR: Right, right — which was a great way to be. (laughs) Much fun. And there was a women’s movement raging there, because it was outside of Fayetteville. It was in the time when women’s culture was rising, rising up. We had the great lesbian migration of people going back and forth across the country. Kent State had happened, and so there was that huge drawback where suddenly people who had been antiwar activists were going back to the land, to try to create another kind of society, you know, trying to figure out some other way to live, and had come to an understanding we had a government that would shoot us. In the place where I lived in Arkansas, there were many of these back-to-the-land communes or collective spaces. And so that was rising.

There were a huge number of collectives in Fayetteville from cross-country women — a women’s trucking collective called the Mother Truckers. (laughs) I loved all these things. There was a pottery collective. There was a women’s health collective. There were just so many things that were happening, and then people who were artists were crossing the country. So you could be in the church basement and we would produce someone like Holly Near or Meg Christian, all these people were passing through and playing or performing for audiences of a hundred, you know, or of 200, of 50 people — very intimate, very political. And those performers were multiracial, so that it was carrying another politic along with that as well. So that was a very exciting time.

But I stayed as kind of a back-to-the-lander for four years, doing political work in Fayetteville, and also doing work against what at that time was called 245D, which is now known as Agent Orange. I went there in ’73, and so Dow Chemical found that Agent Orange — which, we didn’t have that name at all, but 245D — was not needed any longer in Vietnam to defoliate, so it was brought back and sold to farmers in the hills to defoliate mountains so that they could have cattle. People were poor and of course they were eager to do this. There were studies that showed that women were dying. Or, people were dying, but particularly children were being born with great malformations of their bodies. So in very tough circumstances, we fought that, with getting shot at and those kinds of things. We saw it as a huge environmental issue.

We were part of this network where people knew that there were folks like us all over the South, and I guess all over the country. And there were women’s festivals all around us and we were engaged in those. Then we were engaged in things like, when they were trying to get ready for the International Year of the Woman in Houston, and we were having meetings everywhere in preparation for that. And that’s when Phyllis Schlafly starting busing in loads of women to oppose that. It’s when the right figured out that the best way to defeat women is to
get women to defeat women, just as now they think that the best way to defeat people of color is to get people of color to actively work against people of color and get LGBT folks to actively work against LGBT folks. It’s been a very brilliant strategy on their part.

And so we were doing things like going to Little Rock and engaging with the people who were doing the preparation for that meeting, and being very out as lesbians and insisting that we be on the agenda, which was very scary for everybody, because here was Phyllis Schlafly and that crowd and the Moral Majority was rising. Anita Bryant was alive and well and getting out of her orange juice commercials and into anti-gay and lesbian stuff.

So there was lots and lots of activity and somewhere along in that I realized I had to get a job, and so I went into Fayetteville and took a job as director of Head Start, just as a job to put me back into some kind of work where I would be able to have some sort of maneuverability to get other jobs. And I liked that work. I liked that work because it was multiracial. I didn’t like the administrative part, but I was able to go in and really work with poor people and poor rural people. That’s been a passion of mine, all of my life. And to work with people of color and particularly women of color and their children, and to experience the joy of what can be done through a government program of giving people sort of a chance to even move toward equality. To be able to work on racial issues in an institutional setting and to really push that in settings where people were unaccustomed to talking about any of that. [It was in Head Start that I was able to become an anti-racist activist.] I was targeted for being a lesbian, and I –

ANDERSON: Say more about that.

PHARR: Well, it was a complicated story. It had to do with a former director and jealousy and a number of those things, but it sort of rose up, I think from within the organization to say that I was unfit, even though I wasn’t working directly with children, except to – this was in ’77, ’78, and I had lots of women coming in and out of my house, and I had lots of political activity, but in the Head Start itself I was an ordinary worker, a hard worker, and carrying that family work ethic. So they campaigned. They actually lifted up a campaign against me and went out into all the Head Start programs in the county and talked with them about the danger of having me engaged, and starting this kind of campaign to get me out of the job. Did things like public hearings where I wasn’t allowed to go. There was one great big one — a whole auditorium filled in Fayetteville — of people to talk about, you know, “lesbian danger.” And then I had a great number of people who stood in support of me and of the idea that a lesbian can do this work, many heterosexuals — very beloved people who sort of had good politics and knew what to do.

This also coincided with my meeting with a group of 15 people to begin the first battered women’s shelter in Arkansas. How are things related, I don’t know. But there was political activity. We were starting
this volunteer shelter that then became this collective that became one of the great kind of progressive pioneering shelters in the country. And I was the chair of the board and very out in that position. [When I was threatened with being fired,] basically I didn’t have any ground to stand on, but I just went to the director of the economic opportunity agency that was the physical sponsor of Head Start and said, you know, “I’m willing to go public in every newspaper and magazine and TV station in this state, that I have absolutely nothing to lose. There’s no one that I love that won’t be spurned by them. That this is an issue of tremendous importance to me and all the people like me, and if I possibly can, I will sue you.” Of course I had no legal standing, but I thought I’d say it anyway. I was willing to go really public, and I said, “If you’re willing to talk about this publicly and in the secretive way that is so ugly, let’s go for it.” And they backed off.

ANDERSON: And so you decided to leave?

PHARR: Yeah, shortly thereafter. I spent a few months so it wouldn’t be that this pushed me out. Yeah. But I just decided to go eye-to-eye with them. Who would’ve thought that Head Start would’ve been a great place for me? Because I was not an institutional kind of girl. That was an organization that got government grants, and I was so anti-government. I was all of those things from the ’60s and ’70s, you know. But it pushed me into other things. I began working as a VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America]. Worked with low-income elderly people doing research about them, which was extraordinary. I loved that. And then, because of the work that I had done with low-income women in particular, which is who you work with the most when you’re working with Head Start, and with the battered women’s movement — that battered women’s shelter — I could see what a huge need there was in the state for someone to, or some organization, to open up women’s issues, so that women could figure out ways to solve them.

So it was through VISTA I had just enough stability in terms of — I don’t know what they pay you, $600 a month, I think, is what we got — but enough financial stability and being able to move about in the state. I was able to take the time to think through with people the idea of having this, and then develop this organization, the Women’s Project, in Arkansas, which is, I think, probably the best work that I have done, because it was joint work with other people. I mean, I founded it but it was joint work with a lot of people engaged in it, a lot of people talking about it.

As a start, it put as its goal and its mission the elimination of sexism and racism and said that those two are always linked and should never be unlinked, and they are also linked to other oppressions. I was very much influenced by — probably someone that you’ve interviewed — by Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, with the work that they had done in the ’70s around what was not called the intersection of oppressions then, but was that. And understood that all of these oppressions are linked,
and came to understand them much better after I started that work. And then developed the project to try to figure out how you could open up the door with large numbers of women across race and across class, and felt that the way to do that was to take two commonalities, which were violence and economic injustice.

It doesn’t sound like economic injustice goes across class, but one of the things I learned in working with battered women is that most women, when they are battered, they lose their economic standing like that. (snaps fingers) Lots of women who are living in positions of wealth understand it’s conditional, often, on that relationship, rather than on who they are. I think more so [then] maybe than now, I’m not sure. But those two issues gave us ways to talk to all kinds of people and bring people didn’t ordinarily sit down in the same room together to talk.

And so that ran for me, doing that rural work statewide simultaneously with working in the battered women’s shelter as the chair of the board and as a volunteer, and doing things like developing that politic, of a collective politic and of analysis, and doing head-on politics like getting the county commissioners to give us a shelter, and having us be lesbian-baited and be able to stand strong in the face of that. Engage people across all kinds of lines. It was really important work. And then that led me into the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

ANDERSON: Where you were in your own process around gender identity and coming out in the women’s movement, in terms of whatever style or presentation that you had, and how you were thinking of yourself?

PHARR: Well, you know, I came out, and you know how the women’s movement was. The lesbian feminist movement was so we-don’t-do-butch/femme-because-that’s-about-roles-and-we’re-trying-to-figure-out-this-gender-role-thing, which was both good and bad. Yes, they’re figuring out the gender roles and wrong to say sort of pushing butch/femme off to one side. Everybody was considered kind of androgynous, and that was more of the ideal that people were seeking. They were also trying to remove labels, and so I basically lived then as I live now. What I have on today is basically what I wore then. (laughs) And it’s almost no change in style except, I guess, my sneakers are a little more engineered and high-tech, (laughs) but — a lot of my partners were — if you have people, you should talk about the butch/femme scale. They would be much closer to me on that butch/femme scale prior to my engaging the relationship that I’m in now. My first relationship was with someone who was much more femme. With Ann, the girl I went to New Zealand with, that was a very closeted relationship. That was painfully closeted, and I think it had a huge effect on us. But in terms of dealing with gender relations in my family, they were so accustomed to me being three girls, four boys, and Suzanne, you know. I mean I had my own carved out space for gender
and it’s in the South, and for eccentricity. So maybe I should just tell the story of Anne real fast because it’s a really, really important story. I said I probably wouldn’t talk much about girlfriends, but this is important for many reasons. When we went to New Zealand, she was just putting together that there was a strain of a terrible disease in her family — a disease called Marie’s [spinocerebellar] ataxia — and that her father had, just a few years prior, had begun to show symptoms of it, which is stumbling and falling down at first. She and her brother were told it was a 50/50 chance one or the other would have that.

Anne was a wonderful feminist and came back from New Zealand and worked at the public library in New Orleans and did huge women’s exhibits and programming and that kind of thing. And around the time I was at Head Start, she called me and said that she thought she was showing symptoms and that her current partner would not go with her to check — to the Mayo Clinic — to be tested. And I said, “Well, I’m coming.” And I got on a plane. We went to Mayo, and she was tested positive as having Marie’s ataxia, a very rare disease. The cells of the cerebellum die off, and as they do, all the messages going to your muscles are interrupted, and so you lose your balance, your ability to walk, and eventually virtually everything, including your eyesight, speech — really dreadful.

And so we made a pact at that time that when the time came that she could no longer live on her own, if she didn’t have a partner that she should come and live with me. That was the late ’70s, and I take pacts really seriously. That’s not a small word. And so in the mid-’70s she came to Arkansas. When she first came she was walking with, I guess, just a walking stick. And then she moved to the crutches that you put on your arms, and then she moved from that to a walker, and then from that to a wheelchair and/or an Amigo, a scooter.

So when I went to Oregon in ’92, we really couldn’t get services in Little Rock and Ann was falling all the time. She would get up in the night and fall and I was trying to lift her and get her back into bed, and she was very engaged in disability rights. She was engaged in the ADAPT [Disabled Accessible Public Transit] and all the radical forms of disability rights. And working for passage of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], she was going in a wheelchair on a plane with other people in wheelchairs, many of whom who were paralyzed almost totally. And Ann, who couldn’t get herself up if she fell, could hardly be understood when she talked — [they] were going to places like D.C. and closing the Department of Human Services by putting their wheelchairs in the streets. It was just wonderful, wonderful, radical direct action work.

She and I decided that we would move to Oregon, where I had made so many friends doing the campaign there, which we’ll get to later. She lived out her life with me and died in ’96 while we were together in Oregon. All during that time we were — what were we? Were we former partners? Were we — it was the continuation of a very, very deep and long relationship of two people who had discovered their
feminist politics together, explored their love and sexuality with each other, and remained — I think as often happens in maybe lots of people, but among lesbian feminists I know — these deep, deep, deep commitments to one another.

So that’s a little bit of a sideline to this piece. But when we went to Oregon, because of the organizing that I had come from, we were able to put together a whole team of people. And we also had learned that, of course, from the [women’s movement and the] HIV/AIDS movement, of putting a team of people for care. And one of her things that she had worked on all during her time of disability was to be able to keep people at home rather than have to go in nursing homes. We basically changed a house to be wheelchair accessible and she was able to live there except for the last six months or so of her life and ended up in hospice.

But in many ways, I think it’s a story of feminism, a story about the depth to which women are committed to each other beyond sexual commitment. And it’s the story of the involvement of community, and it’s the story of political activity up until the time that you can’t engage in life. You know, it’s all of those things. And it’s about the absolute essential worth of women, that the level of commitment comes out of the most profound belief that this life of this human, this woman, in whatever form, of moving from the most extraordinary beauty, in terms of how the conventional beauty’s perceived — people are so affected by disability — and to see that whole range is beautiful. And it’s meaningful that rather than seeing disability as incapacity, as seeing disability as stages of what happens to a human. So all of that’s happening simultaneously.

END TAPE 3
ANDERSON: That was such a wonderful story about Ann, and I think you’re right that it’s such a testimony to feminism, but also to how we make lesbian families or queer families.

PHARR: Absolutely. Maybe I should talk about that for a minute. Well, I think throughout the ’70s — from the ’70s onward, that was so much of my life, was creating family. Not in a kind of sappy and sentimental sense, but creating these very deep commitments with people. And then in the ’80s, I began doing what I call “making family” with people, where it was actually conscious and thought out. I think about that so much in queer life — of how we do that.

In fact, what I think is going on right now with the Right, all of these issues around marriage have about this much to do (gestures one inch) with marriage and about that much to do (gestures two feet) with how we define family. And I think that’s what we have to be terrified of right now, is that under this push toward authoritarianism and the push toward the merger of church and state is a narrowing definition of family, of family connected both to — not just to benefits, but family connected to whether you have standing in any kind of way in a community.

And I think that particularly affects women of color and low-income women, in general, because of the vilification of women of color regarding family through the welfare system. Starting with the welfare queen from Reagan, moving all the way up now to this whole marriage promotion, and beginning more and more to say who really is a legitimate family, and moving it through the gay marriage thing that marriage is between a man and woman. And then immediately within that they move to the next step, that healthy families are a man, woman, and children. So it moved a whole category — huge categories of people — over into unhealthy families. And then that comes to who then can keep their children, who can adopt children, who can foster care children.

I think what we have done in terms of building lesbian families, or queer families, has been really wonderful. And it marks, I think, how we should live in society, that families should be bonded, not just by blood, but by commitment and by a sense of responsibility for one another. And –

ANDERSON: Did you have responsibility for Ann solely, or was that a community-wide effort?

PHARR: It was organized as a community-wide effort, yeah. And then as time, as her physical condition worsened so dreadfully, she came to the point [when] she had tremendous needs. She had to hire in care as well, because it had to be a little more trained than most of us were.
ANDERSON: So how did that impact your intimate relationships with other women? Were you able to have relationships and lovers during that time?

PHARR: I had three during that time. One, it ended in large part because of the relationship with Ann, in that when the relationship began I said, “You have to understand at some point, my friend Ann will probably come and live with me, and you need to be prepared for that and know that I am absolutely committed to that.” And of course it was the beginning of the relationship, and my partner said, “Oh, that’s fine. That’s fine.” And then when it happens it’s far more difficult, and it becomes either me or her, kind of, very easily. Then I was involved with someone else that was a long-distance relationship.

And then my current partner, Renée, who was entirely engaged in caring for Ann and loving Ann — she had enormous appreciation for her and probably provided as much to her as I did. My partner and I were not living together at that time, but she was constantly in the house and always on the other end of the phone ready to come if anything happened, and providing care when I was out of town because I traveled a tremendous amount.

ANDERSON: So let’s just wrap up the conversation we were starting to have about androgyny and then into butchness and then we’ll go back to politics a little bit. So, you said there’s some peace and some closeness in your family that came as a result of bringing Renee into your family and the different orientation that you had around butchness versus androgyny.

PHARR: Well, I think — several things. One, I think my family always loved me — always has, always will. I think they love their baby daughter, their baby sister. I think that has just been there, even though it has been hard for them. I brought new things. I brought scary things, not only politics but my sexuality — all of that. My going off and living other places and coming back, all of that, all of that was there.

I have tremendous appreciation of them for that, and have always loved them, even when it’s been really, really hard. But I think with my other relationships, people, as I said, were much closer to me on whatever that butch/femme scale is, but then with Renee, she is both femme and very outgoing, and she’s lived much of her life as a heterosexual. And, you know, she loves cooking. She loves sewing. She loves all those things that the women in my family love. And she loves to talk and she’s very affable. When we’re there, she seems to them, I believe, not only as who she is as a very lovable person, but as a person who would be acceptable anywhere. And so it moves me over into this category, I think, of eccentric. (laughs) So they could kind of get together with Renee and talk about my eccentricities.

It opens up this space, because they’ve always thought I was eccentric — that would not have been the word, but peculiar, or outside the norm of what the family was. But now they can embrace it within a framework. And most of them are pretty outspoken now about LGBT
issues — not in big, public places, but within their own lives. And part of that was brought, too, by — when I started working at the Women’s Project, I sent them every publication from day one, every newsletter I sent my family. Because I thought, I’m not going to be able to have conversations with this great big family, but I will let them know me, because I wrote for all of them. And so they got to see all of my politics laid out in that way. So that, I think that was a helpful thing, too.

Once my parents died, I was the person who said, “In order to have family, we have to come together in family reunions,” and I was the organizer for those. We had one very painful moment in that my parents died in ’82. I wrote *Homophobia: Weapons of Sexism* in ’88. And I said, “Anybody in the family wants a copy, I’ll give you a copy.” And some asked for it and some didn’t. (laughs) But the family reunion that I had planned was cancelled as soon as I sent this stuff out. And sort of a false reason was given for canceling it. I think it was felt as something that went too far — not so much as its content, but the fact the name Pharr was on it. That pride of, you know, who we are in the world, and here it was, not only homophobia but sexism on the title of this book, and the family name on the top. That has not been expressed openly. And now they’re proud of it. But I think at that time there was — my sister who carries a lot of power in the family — I think it was a big thing. So they canceled it in September and had it at Thanksgiving, which was the one day when I say to all of my family, “I can’t be with you because I’m with my chosen family.” That was a piece in there.

But I’ve tried — I mean, in my teaching life in the ’60s and — I’ve tried to dress appropriately for whatever it was I was doing. It was like asking my mother to put my pockets low on my skirts and that kind of thing. So there have been times when I taught, you couldn’t wear jeans, I wore skirts. I did what you had to do to be able to have that job. But in my at home life, I have looked as I look today. So, if I look butch today, I did then. If I look androgynous today, I did then. It’s been pretty much a constant line. I mean, the things that have been constant are my love of reading, my love of gardening and the outdoors, my love of animals have been who I’ve been from the time I was a very wee child, you know.

**ANDERSON:** Let’s go back to starting the domestic violence shelter, and tell me about how issues of sexuality impacted that group, that collective, and your organizing efforts, including getting funding and space. You’ve talked about the lesbian baiting, so what was your experience as a worker in forming that shelter?

**PHARR:** I think this is where I have such love of feminism. When you take periods like that, where you have these strong heterosexual feminists who are both at home in their sexuality and understand the kind of flow and fluidity of sexuality, that are working eyeball to eyeball with women they knew last year as heterosexuals who are out this year as lesbians, and have loved them as friends through all of that. I felt like in
Fayetteville that we did extraordinary things in terms of understanding one another and working side by side. For example, when we would be lesbian-baited, it was always, always clear statements by women who were heterosexual in leadership. And almost never anyone saying, “I’m heterosexual, but,” or “I’m heterosexual and,” but allowing themselves to take the brunt of what was happening and instead providing an analysis of the necessity of working against violence. And just being clear that people have different sexualities. It’s great. I loved it.

ANDERSON: How did you get funding?

PHARR: We got funding through the city and county and little bit of government funding, but a lot of yard-sale type funding. A lot of real church — a lot, a lot, a lot of church funding. Now when I started the Women’s Project, it was under the umbrella of the United Methodist Church. I was working as a VISTA and I went to the man who was in charge of the stuff, and he said, “You know, you should go over to the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation” — in Arkansas — Rockefeller had been a governor of Arkansas — “and talk to Tom McRae about funding this.” And I did, and this was a very bright man. Started my long relationship with funders of coming to understand that the way you get funding is you sit down and you have political conversations with people. You don’t go in, manipulate people, you don’t do facts and figures, you just have — you talk the politics of the day and what might happen. And Tom said, “You know, Ronald Reagan’s about to be elected, and you need to get a church to umbrella you. Don’t get a 501C3. With the small majority and the way things are rising, we’re about to enter a very rough decade.”

I went to the district superintendent of the United Methodist Church, because they had been such supporters of the battered women’s shelter, and said, “Would you umbrella this women’s project?” And they said sure. And that’s what started, really, my work against the right, was because immediately we came under attack by what’s called the Good News Methodists, and that’s the internal right wing of the Methodist church. And the attack against the Women’s Project was for lesbianism, because of my being an out lesbian.

Our first grant was from the Women in Crisis of the United Methodist Church — Peggy Halsey. Then the United Methodist Women, who are quite the group. I mean, they’re wonderful, they’re just extraordinary. I guess it’s the largest women’s organization in the country, other than the rightwing ones. And they are very, very strong on educating their members in a progressive way. And every four years they have a huge conference, and they have such politics around that conference that it’s very hard for them find a city where they can have it, because they require that the hotels have good labor practices. They require that the hotels don’t discriminate. They require that they have good environmental practices, they don’t serve you on Styrofoam and plastic. They’re just really extraordinary, wonderful people.
And so within the church they stood with us. They took it on. They took the battle on for us. And so, for five — not just for those five years, all the way through, because it built with different — as the ’80s progressed, there were attacks against feminists everywhere and there were particularly attacks against lesbians in leadership. And the United Methodist Church and its national headquarters was terribly baited as being lesbians and Communists, so they fought those battles alongside us. The Women’s Project was always heterosexual and lesbian, and always African American and white. It was founded on the belief that 50 percent participation of women of color and 50 percent participation of white women is not equal, that we have had such a history of racism, there has to be a tilt toward larger numbers of women of color in order to overcome just what exists in the room at any moment.

And so it was formed on that belief, that we’d have leadership of women of color, a majority of women of color on the board and on the staff, and that that would only be cosmetic — that to make that real that money was about equality, that people would have to be paid the same, and that decision making was about equality, that everybody would have decision-making power over how we spent the resources and what the agenda would be. That’s what made it such a progressive, radical organization — not radical so much in the way that people think of radical today, which is how far to the edge can you go, but radical in how close to the cause can you go.

ANDERSON: What models did you have for creating this? Tell me what those conversations were like in coming up with those guidelines and practices.

PHARR: I don’t know what models we had. It came from different people. I brought a lot with me from the work I’d done over the last decade and observing injustice within the women’s movement.

ANDERSON: I mean, you really were creating a new one, weren’t you?

PHARR: We were trying. We were trying to really create something. We didn’t even call ourselves a collective because we based the idea not on collectivity, but on overcoming injustice, which is I think a little bit different. I’m not sure. I’m not 100 percent sure. But it came out of a racial analysis, was how it came, rather than out of analysis of just fairness among any set of women who happened to sit down together. That was the difference in it, I think. Because we did that, we had a different agenda from what primarily white organizations did. We took on issues and took positions that were awfully hard sometimes, because we were working not to just come at that from some white and middle-class perspective. I loved working there. There was such enormous joy. It was small. I still believe in small organizations.

ANDERSON: How many staff were you?
PHARR: At tops, we would have five. Sometimes we’d get an intern. We had a board of about eight or nine, sometimes ten.

ANDERSON: Did your position change while you were there, or did you go straight into a directorship?

PHARR: We had not intended to have a director. Foundations were adamant about that. We said we’ll have a director in name only, and that’ll be according to task, and that everybody has legitimate, certain tasks, and everybody shares tasks across. And everybody knows each other’s jobs. And everybody’s a public face of this organization. So if we have someone called director, that’s not who gets called forward for the press conference. That would be mostly for funding. I did that only until about ’88, I guess, and we transitioned that title to an African American staff person, Janet Perkins, who was wonderful, and continued on to that. Now the person who carries that title, the one that’s part of the Project, is Judy Matsuoka.

I loved that, being small enough that we could turn on a dime. We could deal with what came up. We could have projects, but we also had this flexibility and we weren’t just constantly overloaded with fundraising, because we maintained a small budget. Now, we didn’t get paid a huge amount of money. We probably would’ve had to fundraise quite a bit more in order to do that. But it made us able to have large impact. And one of our methods was to do local work, and take our local work and talk about it nationally. So it would take actual on-the-ground work, pull analysis from that, and then take that analysis out to the region or to the nation.

An example with that would be, we were watching the fact that the Klan was meeting around the state, the posse comitatus, the various rightwing groups, some of them pretty rough, the rise of skinheads, and we thought, Well, no one is watching this. No one’s observing this and documenting this, so maybe we should step in and do that. And so we did. And as we began to do it, we realized that for people in Arkansas, our constituency, their primary issue was not whether the Klan was around or not, it was whether racist violence was around. It was not whether there was any direct persecution through the Klan, of talking about Jews or doing direct action toward Jews. It was more about the general acts of violence to religious minorities, both verbal and physical. Same with LGBT folks, and we included women in that. And we called this a Women’s Watchcare Network and we engaged with the United Methodist Women to fund it and to be part of it.

Then we went around the state and met with groups, and in the room we would bring people who’d experienced homophobic violence, religiously motivated violence, racially motivated violence, and sexually motivated violence. And then we’d have them tell their stories, and of course what would come out of that is people would realize that their stories were very similar — certainly in their sense of being attacked,
and the impact on them was similar. And many times the actual circumstances were similar.

We decided to monitor racist, religious, homophobic, and sexist violence. In those little groups, we would get them to monitor their town, so if the Klan was putting a flier on a car in front of the Wal-Mart, to send us that flier, to read their newspaper, to cut out the clippings about the acts of violence, and then we would put it in a document, a log. And we would document how many women had been murdered and what it was motivated by — gender. It would be anecdotal, so in those we would tell what weapon was used, what the circumstances were, whether her children were present, where she was found, whatever, and all the way through.

And what we found in doing that is that we would have this many documents about women, this many documents about race, this many documents about religious folks, and this many documents about the LGBT people (gestures decreasing size of documents.) And part of that had to do with who would report, because you have a closeted LGBT community, and I don’t want to talk about homophobic violence. But what was startling in it was this enormous number of women being murdered. And we were able to analyze it and say how many were murdered. We didn’t even do rape and incest and all the other acts of violence — though in racial violence and religious violence and homophobic violence, we did verbal violence as well as physical violence as well as murders, so that we could talk about the climate of violence in the state.

But with women we were able to analyze — we started this in ’87 or ’88, I think — and we were able to analyze whether they were in relationship with the person who killed them, whether there was any sexual act involved, whether there was any acts of violence against their body, like drawing things on it, cutting things on it, that kind of thing. We were able to analyze all of those pieces. And so we kept these horrible logs, wonderful and horrible, with these huge numbers of women who were killed. And we’ve had them now 18 years.

And saying that we were using them for all kinds of things. One of the things we used — but let me finish that sentence. We would use them for all kinds of things, but, if nothing else, that we would be witness during this period of history. We would be there to say, This is the racial climate in the state. This is the climate of homophobia. This is the climate of religious oppression, and this is the climate of murder of women. And though we may never change anything, people will know that as many women were killed each year in Arkansas as were killed in Vietnam at the height of the war. And who is speaking out and who is crying about this?

We also used it to say sexist violence should be considered a hate crime. We were among the first to say that. And what made it so powerful was we would say, What is it about this that’s not the same as acts against people of color or acts against religious minorities? So we did a lot of national work, taking that local evidence. Then we did a lot
of just consciousness-raising, and we still do that. It’s kind of gotten [to be] a popular thing now, but we would put tombstones out on our front lawn with a bio of the woman — this was around 1990 — and call press, and the families would come and lay flowers next to them and you would see the picture of this woman and read this heartbreaking story of why and how she was killed, and often, what didn’t happen to the perpetrator. So that’s one of the kinds of things that we did.

We’d train women in non-traditional jobs and then we would draw analysis out of that and talk about it. We would take on really, really hard issues. An example would be at the University of Arkansas, it had a great winning basketball season. They were heading to a tournament. And the basketball players, who happened, that year, to be African American, took home to the dorm a young — I don’t know how young, maybe college-age — white woman, who was very drunk and dancing on the tables and that sort of thing, and all raped her. And it was a huge, huge thing in the press because it was going to take them out of the tournament. That was what the primary press was about it. We jumped in the middle of that. And it was fierce. It was really fierce. We thought that this was what our job was, that we had to jump in the middle of that and talk about both race and gender.

ANDERSON: So did you have differences of opinion with other feminist organizations and leadership?

PHARR: The feminists were furious with us, and the African American community was furious with us, and the sports community was furious with us. Eventually I think people came to understand what we were talking about. But we did a gender analysis about rape, and we did a racial analysis about sports and African Americans and the use of African Americans and tossing them away, out of the school. We put those two things together. We gained someone here. We would lose someone there, but gosh, we were attacked in the newspaper. We received hate mail, all kinds of things.

But we thought that this was our work. The work was not to lay back and say, Well yeah, you know, she was drinking. She deserved to be raped. Well yeah, you know, these African American men, it doesn’t matter that they were poor young men in southeast Arkansas who were recruited to play basketball and are not given an education while they’re there, and the second they have an injury are tossed out and back in poverty. We’re not going to talk about race and class, we’re going to talk about all of that. So that was our work.

ANDERSON: Did you have any engagement with the Clintons through the Women’s Project?

PHARR: We criticized him a lot. I guess we were uppity women.
ANDERSON: I think they said that about Hilary, too, but I guess you were more uppity.

PHARR: Yeah. I think we had some admiration of Hilary, but when Clinton appointed — the time that we were working at our strongest, Arkansas had more millionaires in northwest Arkansas than, I think they said, were in the Upper East Side of New York. Wal-Mart came out of there. Tyson came out of there. There were all these people that were just loaded, top of the Forbes line in Arkansas. And Bill Clinton created a committee to advise schools out of those guys. We were furious. We were some of the first people to analyze Wal-Mart in the ’80s. And we said, So, OK, we’ve got this huge corporation that hires mostly women, that cuts their hours just short of full time. They get no benefits — many of whom are people of color, almost all are working-class women. And who have to go on welfare in order to survive and who don’t have medical care.

These are the people that you want to advise our schools? You have Tyson, who’s running a chicken industry in which farmers are suffering and in which chickens are receiving horrible medications under cruel conditions in a time in which he’s flying people in from Mexico to work — this is before anyone was concerned very much about legal/illegal — to work in the plants, because he can pay them so little money, and is known as a woman abuser: this is who you want to advise our schools? These are people who want people for their factories. These are people who are not working to build an economic system that benefits everyone. These are people who want people who can actually just be go-to and do what they say and never have quite enough in life. It was foreshadowing what we have today. So we criticized Bill pretty heavily on that.

ANDERSON: Is this also the time when you’re starting to do the workshops around homophobia? Was that under the auspices of the Women’s Project, or was that connected to your work with the [National] Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCADV]?

PHARR: This project was that kind of organization, where everything we did was under its auspices. I went as the Women’s Project and chair of the Lesbian Task Force of NCADV. And the way I came into that in ’83 was, they wanted an open lesbian who was doing the work openly in a battered women’s program from somewhere around the country, and so they asked me to come to one of the big conferences. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence had big annual conferences, every two years and they wanted me to come and to consider doing that. I went to a conference and, by some way they — I think I was kind of anointed, but anyway, I was elected there to chair this. I went then to my first coalition meeting and it started extraordinary growth for me. It was interesting. I drove from Arkansas to Colorado, and I picked up a woman in Oklahoma who had just been fired for being a lesbian in a
shelter. Went to this National Coalition meeting, had my first meeting and understanding of the Women of Color Task Force, which was just such an extraordinary, powerful, wonderful group led by Caitlin Fullwood. And in that meeting, talked about what lesbians and battered women have in common, and it went from there.

At the conference where I was elected — it was a very small Lesbian Task Force. At that time, I bet they didn’t have ten people. And they had decided at that conference that they were going to wear a pink triangle for visibility, and they were going to ask their allies, other women, to wear pink triangles. Also at that conference, they were going to have a women of color institute. So these two things were happening. So you had people walking around with pink triangles and you had this women of color institute that about 100 women came to, and I think there were 1,500 or so people at the conference itself — wonderful conference.

What happened is the women of color came into the conference powerfully, because they’d just had a full day of talking with one another, and you know that heady feeling it gives you when you find all these others who think like you and experience the same thing as you: it gives you a sense of power and a sense of collective strength. So they come into the conference and all of us are just astounded, and we just think it’s just the most wonderful and extraordinary thing we’ve ever seen. Well, the fallout from that was that women went home to their local communities and said, There’s no room for white women in this movement any more. It’s been taken over by lesbians and women of color. Now I would suspect in combination we might have represented 150 people out of 1,500.

And so my first job as chair of the Lesbian Task Force was to build a strategy within NCADV for us to go out into these communities where they were going to drop out of NCADV — the state coalitions were, which would’ve been devastating — and to meet with them. And so the plan was for me to go with a heterosexual member and that we would talk about the importance of having lesbians in the movement and the movement itself. So we did. We went to places like Louisiana and Mississippi, and it was life changing.

ANDERSON: And you were talking to other workers in the movement?

PHARR: Uh-huh, their state coalitions. They were shelter directors, mostly. And in some places they ate us alive. One of our agreements before we went in is that the heterosexual woman would not say that she was heterosexual. And so for the first time, they had to hear what it felt like, and feel what it felt like, to be totally dehumanized, be talked about as the scum of the earth. We did well in some places. Some places stayed and a couple withdrew. But out of that came the commitment to do the homophobia workshops, and in the Lesbian Task Force we said, We’re not going to do that without also doing work on racism. And so we would combine the two of those. In the beginning, I did them. And then I and Caitlin Fullwood did them together as a biracial team. And we did
them everywhere. Little place, big place, all over the country. Sometimes I was alone, sometimes with her. And that’s what provided the material that’s in the homophobia book. It was wonderful. But being part of NCADV and working — usually we’d have 40 people, one person per state, and then the organization that was women of color and white women, lesbian and heterosexual, rural and urban, doing consensus decision making that was quite extraordinary, and it really built my politics.

What I always say about this movement, it has given me my life and my best friends, my very best friends, the people that have the deepest meaning to me. That was a great time, because in the women’s anti-violence movement, every issue is there. There’s not an issue that we have in society that doesn’t appear on the table in that movement. To do that on a consensus format where everyone speaks, you actually get to hear all the different perspectives on that movement. And we had some terrible struggles in it, the worst of which was when we had the potential for funding from the Department of Justice. And they were going to give us a very large grant. I think it was about $600,000 for publicity regarding battered women. We insisted in that if we were going to do it, we were going to talk about race and we were going to talk about sexuality. They said no, and it came down to whether we would accept it on their terms or not. And we refused it.

ANDERSON:  But that was a very controversial decision, I’m sure.

PHARR:  Hugely. Hugely.

ANDERSON:  You must’ve had huge fights about that.

PHARR:  And with tremendous agony, we talked and worked and debated. And people were broken-hearted. I was broken-hearted, though I was in leadership to refuse it. But it was heart breaking. Then another group formed that said they would accept it, and that had enormous impact on the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and it’s never been quite as strong.

ANDERSON:  So where did lesbian battery fit in to all of that? How did people start talking about that?

PHARR:  Right after I became the chair, we were hearing people talk about sadomasochism. We were hearing people talking about battering. We were hearing — these things were rising up around violence. There was a woman who was part of the Lesbian Task Force named Barbara Hart — a great attorney for the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. And she and I cooked up this idea to have a meeting about it, and she’s a very strong-minded, tough customer. And I thought I was, but we didn’t have the courage to say it was a meeting on lesbian
battering. We called it a gathering on violence in the lesbian community.

We just sent out a letter to all of the state coalitions off the NCADV mailing list, and we set up to have it at the 4-H Center, outside of Washington, which is a place we often met, because it was pretty inexpensive. Much to our surprise, over 100 women showed up. We really had a lot on our hands — here we were, in the middle of this, with more people than we ever thought would have interest in it. And we spent most of the time having people tell their stories, and it was the first time that I know of [that] there had been a national public moment for that, and it was devastating. Women I thought of as some of the strongest, toughest people I’d ever seen were crying their eyes out to hear it. Not because it happened to them, but for many in the room, they had been engaged in the battering, had experienced the battering — but because they were hearing women say, My batterer is a feminist leader in my town; these are the ways in which this happened to me.

I know this wonderful woman from Mississippi, Gail Martin — came back to the dormitory after the first night. And she was standing out in the hall, and she’s a big strong woman. Tough. Great politics. She was just crying. She said, “Suzanne, I built all of my politics on the belief that lesbians were different from other women.” And we did. There was a kind of essentialism — a belief that people had, all through the ’70s and certainly up to that point in the ’80s, and thereafter probably still — I don’t know if people have it any more — but the belief that we were somehow different. We did not participate in the things that the heterosexual world participated in, not just that we were feminists, but there was something about — we were more loving – we were women with women. We knew that was going to reshape our definition of male violence. And out of that we thought, Well, what can we do with all this we learned? We decided as the Lesbian Task Force to publish an anthology and put it right out. We asked someone who wasn’t a member of the Lesbian Task Force, we asked Kerry Lobel to work with a team from the task force and for her to edit it. And we put out a book called *Naming the Violence*, and that’s what broke open the subject, which is now much broader than that, of course. It’s violence in the LGBT community and it’s much, much broader than what it was.

Then there began to be groups created to work with that. We developed a strategy to go into shelters to figure out — not so much beforehand, but how to make shelters places where lesbian workers would not know discrimination. And now we had to develop a strategy of how to create shelters where lesbian workers were not discriminated [against] and where women who were lesbians felt safe to come into them.

ANDERSON: Did you have fear about putting this information out there and what the right would do with it?
PHARR: We didn’t just have fear about the right at that point. It was fear of the mainstream feminists. It was fear of our funders. It was fear of the people we work with in churches, it was fear of our coworkers, it was fear — it was devastating news for everyone. We knew homophobia would up lesbian baiting. Everything would move in a different way from that day onward, and that things would have to be reshaped in our minds, everybody’s minds. Jean Grosholtz was there, and I know she took a strong lead on how to make this public, and helped edit this statement to the Lesbian Nation, as we called it in those days, which is in that anthology. But it was quite amazing. So the workshops then became more complex as well, in talking about homophobia and racism and trying to figure out how to do that. But I think that was great work.

When the day came for me to write the book on homophobia, my idea was that I had been given the privilege of this information from doing all these workshops — I had done probably 20 or 30 a year for a number of years, some of those with Caitlin, and lots and lots of them alone. And I thought, I should write this down and give this back to people. My idea was I would take it and have it copied and I’d send it to the state coalitions and they could do what they wanted to get it back to these groups. And then this wonderful feminist fundraiser came to my house, Kim Klein — extraordinary person, probably is known as the best progressive fundraiser and teacher about fundraising in the country. And at that time, I think she was living here in Knoxville, where she worked for the Appalachian Community Fund.

She came by, and I was telling her about it, and she said, “Well, why don’t you publish it?” And I said, “Publish it? I don’t think so.” And she said, “Sure. I could raise the money for that.” She said, “In fact, I have my own little imprint. It’s a press.” But she said, “Send it off to someone, others, and see if they will.” And I sent it to a couple of feminist presses, and I remember one of them was run by a good friend of mine who said, “Suzanne, you know, we can’t publish this. This is not theory. Marilyn Fry is theory.” I said, “Oh, OK.” So I went back to Kim and she said, “We’ll publish it.” So she raised — I think out of Boston — I think it was $3000 or $5000 — $5000 I think it was.

And we published 3,000 copies, and started selling it to benefit the Women’s Project. And it just went from there, and I think now it’s up to, I don’t know, 45,000 copies or so, you know, and it’s taught in various classes and that kind of thing. Though I would say, had I known, before I wrote it that it was going to be published and it was going to be reviewed and that people were going to teach it, I never would’ve written it.

ANDERSON: Because?

PHARR: It was way too public. It changed my whole role in life. I became a writer. I became more of a speaker. I had much more of a public place. I mean, because of it I’ve received tremendous regard and respect and kindnesses, but it shifted me so much from this community organizer to
this more public, public place. Once you have writer behind your name, it shifts who you are in the world, which is interesting.

ANDERSON: And then you were called on to do public speaking and performing in a way that was uncomfortable to you?

PHARR: And was separated off from people in a way. It moves you to a little bit of a place of — stardom is not the right word, but regard that’s not totally earned in the way it’s earned when you work on the ground, you know?

END TAPE 4
ANDERSON: Let’s move into the 1990s and start talking about Oregon, which I guess in certain ways marks your entry into the LGBT political world. I mean, NCADV and Women’s Project, to my mind, fit squarely into lesbian feminism and you really identified with that community and that movement.

PHARR: Still do. Still call myself a lesbian feminist. Kind of old style. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Doing the work in Oregon meant that you had a very different community of folks to work, including gay men and. So why don’t you talk about that?

PHARR: Now, during this period of the ’80s, I was doing things like going to Creating Change [The NGLTF’s annual conference], so I was engaged with the movement and doing a lot of organizing around LGBT stuff, through the Women’s Project, and had done some in the ’70s, of course. So, I was always part of that, but I’ve always been absolutely set on a multi-issued, multiracial, broad-based movements. That’s been my life work. I’ve never been able to be single issue. And so if it’s not multiracial and multi-issued, I try to find a place for that. So I was still working for the Women’s Project when I went to Oregon, and the way I was called to do that is because of the work that we were doing monitoring the violence against women and people of color. We were also — we were going and standing up against the Klan and we were really monitoring those really hard far-right groups in Arkansas as well, and going to conferences regarding that kind of far-right violence.

And so I was under attack by the right, the theocratic right, and I was also monitoring the far right, and I was coming to have this greater and greater understanding of it. I went to a Creating Change conference — I don’t know what year — anyway, one year. And Donna Redwing and Scot Nakagawa from Oregon said, Suzanne, we have this video we’d like for you to watch, because they knew me from my working against the right, and so we went down in the basement of the building that we were meeting in, and I looked at it and it was by the Oregon Citizen’s Alliance. I watched it and this has been — probably my greatest skill is to be able to sort of see themes and patterns and connections and put that in language that people can understand. If I have a gift, I think that’s probably just connecting dots, as they call it now.

So I looked at this and I said, “Oh, you know, this is so much more than an attack against the LGBT community, or what we called the lesbian and gay community at the time.” I said, “You know, this is an attack against really democratic principles, an attack against democracy.” They wanted me to come to Oregon, and it was beneficial for the Women’s Project for me to go there at that time because they were going to pay me to come and we needed the money, we were
always up against it with funding. I agreed to go out for a few months and work to help people in the state to understand this in a broad sense, rather than in a narrow sense — sort of like the marriage issue today — to understand this in a broad sense, not in a narrow sense. I spent, I think at first, six months there, basically working on analysis with people and spreading that. I worked for some people, Scot Nakagawa and Marcy Westerling, to start this rural organizing project that was modeled off the Women’s Project, and did that kind of work. And got people to understand how to frame this in this much larger way.

And then I left. I don’t know, it was June, and the election was in November. I got back to Arkansas and I realized, Well, this is crazy, so I turned around and went back and went for the campaign. And I did the national press for the campaign, and then the international press for — my job was to take the local and spin it to the state and spin the state to the national, or the national to the international, which we did, and raised lots of money, and I think, really, really expanded people’s thinking. And we won.

Then it was after that that I decided to actually move there, because of getting services for Anne. We basically just moved an arm of the Women’s Project there and I did national work. So at that time I was called to go back and forth across the country to talk about all the issues of violence against women, talking about civil rights. I’ve spent much of my adult life as — you know, certainly in the Women’s Project onward — identifying as an antiracist worker. That was always work to be done in workshops, really, regarding that. There were workshops to be done regarding everything that the Right was bringing up. I just traveled, almost all the time. Then I returned — I wrote the book on In the Time of the Right.

ANDERSON: How did you end up writing that second book when you were so reluctant to receive all the attention from the first one?

PHARR: Because I was terrified. And at that time I was doing things like organizing meetings of — for example, we did a four-day meeting at Blue Mountain for people who were researchers of the right wing, and pulled together — which was always my goal in meetings, was to bring people who weren’t the usual mainstream people, but — because most of the researchers were white and were men, and so we held a meeting where we brought also women and people of color to the meeting and talked about what the right wing was up to. As I got deeper and deeper into it, from just being attacked from it and observing it and monitoring it, I was now getting more eyeball to eyeball. I was chasing the Promise Keepers. A group of us went inside one of the Promise Keepers’ meetings. I was moving deeper and deeper into my investigation of the right, my knowledge of the right, and my understanding of what the future was going to look like.
There were a few of us running around, basically saying, The sky is falling. I thought it was really important to say to people in 1996, You think life is one way, but the right has already occupied this country. That’s why the book’s called *In the Time of the Right*. That it’s no longer this particular kind of battle. And people actually thought I was kind of a conspiracy theorist, I think. And so, what you had was, in that period of time after so much of this came from the campaign of Barry Goldwater onward — but the big time was during the development of institutions in the ’70s, and then Reagan and that huge move to anti-taxation and privatization. And then the first Bush, then Clinton pulling the Senate to the right.

And then when George Bush wasn’t elected but put in office, that the right really became institutionalized. They were getting a little bit iffy at that time, but they were still very strong and still in control of the country. But this institutionalized them, in a certain way. Many of us thought, Well, we’ve elected this idiot. He’s laughable. And yet we also knew that he was meeting with the Heritage Foundation every Thursday morning at 8:30, we knew that the right was in his cabinet, that it was institutionalized in a different kind of way in government.

Then you have September 11th, and you have the infusion of fear, which I thought was an incredibly important situation the right has known — as Richard Viguerie says, from the first, that there’s nothing that raises money like fear and there’s nothing that motivates people like fear. You have the infusion of fear and a shift in our politics that gives the right the opportunity to put something in place they’ve had pieces of for years, and a plan of for years — the USA PATRIOT Act. They have a clamping down and a repression, and I don’t think people really awakened until the 2004 elections, where people understood that the right had been consolidated, now, not just institutionalized, but consolidated. And so now you have all kinds of people who are running around, writing books about the right, talking about the right, being authorities on the right, who have never studied the right, and thank goodness for them, but no longer do people think that we’re saying the sky is falling. In fact, people are acting as though they’d known this all along.

But it was very hard to get an audience in, and that’s why I wrote that book, because I felt like we were a country that was moving toward fascism, and that there was a political, moral, social obligation to write about what is happening and what we might do to fight that. I would write a little bit of a different book now because we see and understand and know so much more, and so many other factors have come in. I would keep that book, but I would add to it in terms of what we need to do and the different ways we’ve seen it become institutionalized since 1996.

It’s probably the center of my political thought now, is how do we resist, not just reactively, but how do we resist and how do we create vision and action that is connected both to resistance and vision. Two
pieces I’ve done — well, there are several pieces. One is I worked for five other Southerners to create Southerners on New Ground, which is to work with LGBT people in the South to take on race, class, and gender, and to work with civil rights organizations to take on LGBT issues. So that’s an effort to build a broad-based movement, and it’s very much needed now. Out of that has come a certain positioning around the marriage chaos (laughs) that we’re in — to try to understand that in terms of the right and to understand that in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality, to understand that, as I think I said earlier, a small portion of this is about marriage and a very large portion of this is about the definition of family. And then to try to help people to think through what it means to be for the left or for progressive — we don’t have language any more for who we are — but to be funded through 501C3s.

Well, I started in the early ’90s asking the question, can you build a movement, a real, deep social change movement on the back of a 501C3? And I think the answer to that is no. And then Incite!, the great women of color group against violence against women did a conference called The Revolution Will Not Be Funded. We talked about that at some length for several days. But I think that what that has done, this non-profit sector that’s been created is extraordinary competition. So instead of building connections and building movement we’re fighting for these crumbs of money. It’s also created the kind of control of our issues and the boundaries of how far we move toward the edge of change. And it’s given tremendous tax breaks to wealthy individuals who, if we had the right taxation system, that money would be in our tax base and we would all be funded to have health care and those kinds of things. And it’s more complex than that, but those are the basic things — I think we have been very, very hampered by this — that we have been changed into people who are professionalized as organizers and as staff members of organizations. The organizations are very institutionalized and we do far more service delivery.

ANDERSON: How would you raise money then?

PHARR: We’d raise it from individuals. We had a labor movement that wasn’t a 501C3 movement. We would raise it through people who cared about the issues. We would have to figure that out. It would not be easy. We’re in a tough situation, I think, because of it. But if you talk to almost anybody at this point who works in a non-profit, they will tell you that they are not at the cutting edge of social change, that they spend huge amounts of their time writing grants and chasing money and trying to accommodate funders. And this is not to denigrate funders — I think people like the Funding Exchange try very, very hard to do social justice funding and to do that in a very democratic kind of way. But they’re about this big (gestures one inch) compared to the world of philanthropy. So that’s been one of the efforts that I’ve been working on over the years.
And another one is — started out the battered women’s movement where we moved from a social change movement to a very professionalized movement, very connected with the justice department, very centrist and very service delivery — to see if we could shift that to connecting organizing, and service delivery. It’s kind of a very long-range goal, but I think it’s that we have to have both, and that we sort of move to either/or or, once the money started coming out of the government, moved in a certain professionalized way that has not ended violence against women. It has put enormous amount of money into education, into service delivery, and we have just as many women [being battered.]

So when my friend Ann died in 1996, I began looking south again, because I love the South. It was so much my home. I love the terrain of the South, I love the smells of the South. I know where my work is in the South always, because we have such big and pretty clear issues. And so I started — I was on the board of the Highlander Center, at that time and I was also working still with the Women’s Project. I was just a staff member in Oregon. So I started looking — every time I would come to a Highlander board meeting, I would look for land somewhere in east Tennessee or North Carolina. During that time, my beloved uncle and aunt had a terrible accident and my partner and I decided we would move south right away in order to be with them, and we moved to Florida for a year. At the end of that time, after they recovered their health — they were in their late eighties, early nineties — the director of Highlander left and they needed an interim director, and the Women’s Project was, again, willing to put me on loan.

I came to be the interim director and was persuaded by the staff and board to accept the job as director, which was not a job I was seeking and I don’t like administrative work. I mean, I have talent for it and can raise money and take care of staff, development, all of those kinds of things, but at the same time I thought, This is a critical institution in the South and the country and in the world — I mean, it’s international in so many ways, that this might be the most important work. It also might be important to do what people had always challenged me to do. The Women’s Project has that kind of set up where they’re paid the same amount of money, they do collective decision making, whatnot. But that’s a little group. Can you do it with a big staff? And so I thought it would be good to see whether it could be done with a staff of 17, whether it could be democratized in a deep sense, and also whether it could be brought very much into the twenty-first century with critical issues of the moment. And maybe I was lured a little bit by being the first woman director since 1932.

ANDERSON: And how successful were you on those two fronts, with the staff and with the change in focus?
PHARR: I think I would give myself pretty high marks on both of those. We spent a lot of time thinking and writing about what we were doing and listening to people and shifting and moving to a very strong program on working with immigrants and working with youth and setting up grassroots think tanks so that people could come in and have ways to share ideas that weren’t just sitting in academic settings or big think tank settings, so — I’m happy with that. Yeah, I liked that work, and I liked being a lesbian feminist, being out, talking about those issues, being clear about those issues, holding people accountable on race, holding them accountable on gender, holding them accountable on class — I personally, and us collectively, having that high in our consciousness.

ANDERSON: Any resistance to you as a woman or a lesbian director?

PHARR: A little from the staff, a little from the board, little from our constituencies — Highlander has eight constituencies. It’s really quite a large organization, in terms of the people it’s connected with. Not enough to put any of the impediment in my work. I’ve had a very fortunate life of people being good to me. I haven’t been viciously attacked. And people have been pretty respectful of who I am as a person and what I have to say. I think part comes from the fact of having done on-the-ground work. And people respect local organizers, and it’s my favorite work to do.

ANDERSON: So how long were you at Highlander?

PHARR: Five years. I went in, said, “I’ll give you five years,” and I gave them five years, and I said, “Y’all have the longest advance notice.” Because I didn’t want to do that. I mean, I didn’t want to spend — I could still be there, but I didn’t want to spend 10, 15 years. Plus, I feel like I love working with young people. I think I told you privately yesterday, I love teenagers. I just always have. I love that sense of rebellion, that sense of discovery and search for self, and the ones that are bad, I really love. So I hope people who don’t read this account now send me all their teenagers, (laughs) but —

And I very much believe in a youth movement. I feel that our great movements all were fueled by young people, that high school students and college students — think of the civil rights movement, think of the labor movement, think of the women’s movement: we were young. Think of the antiwar movement. We were young, young folks. And I think that we have not done right to young people through this kind of 501C3 and professionalization and institutionalization of our movement. There haven’t been the places for young people to enter and to be treated with great regard and respect and have real tasks and responsibilities, and held accountable.
So one of the things I really want to do — and did at Highlander — was move my gray hair out of the way so someone younger could have that position. I think this would be a great time for Highlander to have a director who’s in her or his thirties, rather than mid-sixties. Also think that’s a group of people that wasn’t given great opportunity to be engaged in so many organizational settings that a lot of us were, in terms of doing on-the-ground work and also growing up through organizations. So there’s not a large pool of people who are available in their thirties and early forties to lead organizations right there. There are way more people available who are 45 to 65. And there’s a good bit of organizing with people under 25, but there’s this middle ground that’s, I think, not given the attention and the possibility and opportunity, and had to suffer through Reagan without support. Now suffering through Bush.

ANDERSON: Is Highlander a feminist organization?

PHARR: I think so. I think so. It’s had great feminist leadership, and one of the great feminists who led it was John Gaventa — he and his wife, strong, strong feminists. He was director and she worked on the staff. But the founder of Highlander was not a feminist, Myles Horton, and it harmed, I think, its work. The only time I ever met him, he and I went eyeball to eyeball with that issue, sitting at a table at Highlander. I was going through with a friend and wanted to visit there. It was 1981 or 1980, I guess, and he asked me what I did. He was always great about engaging people in what they did, and I talked to him about it, and he was disparaging. And I was really challenging as well. I said, “So you’ve missed an entire movement. You’ve missed an entire movement of great possibility, and now you’re missing the LGBT movement, and because of this tight focus on economics and thinking of those issues and related only economically and —”

There are always lots of women working at Highlander, but it was not a feminist organization. I think John Gaventa helped to move it in that direction, so that left some real opening. And it was moved on the LGBT front by one of the staff members, Nina Reining, who came there off of — she was, I guess, part of a union strike, came off the line to Highlander as a cook, and raised her children there. She’s the person who’s been there the longest. She’s now been there probably 26, 27 years. Her son is gay and she raised that child there and pushed the staff, with support from other people and from me and from others on the board, to be a more open place, and that also helped to open the door for me to be there as an out lesbian.

ANDERSON: So what’s next for you, then?

PHARR: Well, I don’t know. Because I’m 66, people assumed that when I left Highlander it was to retirement. I can’t even imagine retirement. I come
from that political generation that our political work is our life, our life is our political work. What would you retire from? There’s some really critical issues that I want to work with. I want to do organizing in the South. I’m about to start to work with Southerners on New Ground, half-time, but working very specifically around building and developing young people, people of color, rural people — doing some work with people of faith who have liberation theology in their world faith view, trying to lift up organizing that’s broad based — work with young, white, antiracist workers.

I’m thinking about starting a blog. You know, I don’t know. I don’t know beans about doing one, but people have thought that might be a good idea. I’d like to write, but I don’t want to write in a way that you’re seeking publication, or I don’t think I want to write another book, but I wouldn’t mind writing a short piece every day. I have a lot of things that I think about all the time, and I think with other people about it. And I think if I could be what I think of myself as, as a writer — as a writer, I think of myself as a translator, that taking much larger and much more complex ideas and putting them in language that George Orwell would say that you could see through. That was my goal.

If I could write that language, if I could take complex concepts and complex language — I really dislike the language of the university right now. I find it so detached and so separate from people who are living on the ground. When people talk about postmodern this and deconstructing that, I find that language not helpful. In fact, I find it harmful. It makes me feel like we need to go back to Berkeley of the ’60s and do a little revolt around language. That’s what I would like to do. That’s what I tried to do in the homophobia book, was take what’s complex — or In the Time of the Right — take what’s complex and put it in language that I understand, that my family understands, that my neighbors understand, that the people I organize with understand. Most of it’s translation for me, you know, but then it becomes translation for others.

And I want to do on-the-ground work, local organizing, or support people doing local organizing around the South, because I think one of our great failures is that we don’t have a constituency. We have organizations that have paid staff members without constituencies of people who are changing and moving and engaged. I feel like our work now needs to be to always thinking — what is that [phrase]? Act local, think globally — I think that’s how we should be now. I think that we should be doing local work, but thinking about how we’re connected internationally, and make those relationships international. I think we have a great obligation to people in other countries to do resistance in the belly of the beast, even more than we do to male models of liberation. I think they’re great models of liberation, out in the rest of the world, and that we can follow a lot of those. I mean, we can create new models ourselves, but I think we can follow those. But I think we need to do resistance because we have that obligation, and as we sit inside this world power that’s doing extraordinary harm worldwide. Not
just the war, but in our movements around NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and CAFTA [Central American Free Trade Agreement], and it goes on and on and on.

I think there’s enormous amounts of work available for us now. And you know I have high energy for that work. I love it, and I’m lucky to sort of have in my DNA from my family this kind of physical capacity to work hard. My family’s the sort that falls down dead in the fields. (laughs) They do work as long as they absolutely possibly can. My parents ended up in nursing homes because of some conditions that happened to them, but, I mean, nobody knew what retirement was. It was not part of their lives, and that’s probably why we live to our nineties. I don’t know.

ANDERSON: Since you entered social change work through the women’s movement, I’m interested in hearing some of your reflections in terms of where the women’s movement has come. How would you assess its trajectory compared to what its roots were when you got involved? And do you find any hope in what the women’s movement or feminists are talking about and working towards these days?

PHARR: You know, I guess I have some longing for people to still use the word feminist, and who don’t. I feel like the attacks the right made against the women’s movement were very successful and very strategic. Through talk shows, through all of those academic articles, through that constant press, that barrage, of taking it down, of creating women’s groups to attack it — and I feel in young women a great desire to be strong, and to be in charge of their bodies and to be able to be independent. But I feel it’s unorganized. I guess that would be the strongest feeling about it — but just such, such vigor and such energy and kind of in your face, don’t mess with me. I mean, some are young girls in gangs. Some are young lesbians in bars. Even among my great nieces and nephews that have been engaged in church-related work, where they’re very organized, more evangelical, even in them I find this, despite their yielding to all the abstinence stuff, that underneath that there’s this great current of sexuality and a desire to be strong. And the women’s movement gave that to them.

I think our problem now is, How do we capture imagination in organizing? One of the places where I think it’s such a huge battleground — and I don’t know who all’s fighting it or how successful the fight is, and I myself am not in an organized way engaged in this — is this whole abstinence movement and the losses that we have suffered around sex education. I don’t know how we can ever maintain reproductive rights if we don’t have sex education. Everything is in this continuum, and I don’t think we have that. I don’t know if you saw any of the billboards in town. There are lots of them about abstinence, and it’s pretty staggering. It’s very, very strong in the South, as it is all over the country. We don’t have those spaces for young people to have those
conversations here, since it’s taken out of so many of the classrooms, and then you have faulty information given to them through the abstinence programs.

So I think in all of that there’s lots of potential in it as well. Now, I don’t think we could pull together 10,000 or 20,000 young people the way the Pope can. When the other Pope came to Colorado, you’ve got all these zillion young people who show up, but I think we can offer tremendous opportunities for people to think about the ownership of their bodies, building on that sense of, I want to be in charge of my life. I think that’s the capturing the imagination.

The young women that I know who name themselves as feminists are fierce. I think in many ways they’re more fierce than I ever was. So I like that. I really like that. I like that. They’ll just get right up in your face and talk. I like how fluid they are in their sexuality. I’m regretful for them that they are not in a movement surrounding them to get them enormous breathing space, but I think they’re a movement of themselves in some way. I think a lot of the trans movement is complex. And for me, things have to be complex in order to be a movement. You can’t just be one simple, single-issue thing very easily. It has complexities to it.

I’m regretful that I don’t have a sense of feminism [today] in an organized way. I think other places may, maybe in academia, where you have a women’s studies class or two. I don’t know. But I don’t think on the community level — there’s not that organizational sense of where you can go and where you can be. Probably the closest to it is a battered women’s shelter, and that will tell you how small that is.

So I have one other thing to say, in terms of what I would like to do. I’m very taken by people right now in the antiracist community, people of color in particular, who are working on greater study and understanding of the speeches of King’s last two years of writings and speeches, and the whole notion of how to build beloved community. When I think about resistance and vision, I think we probably are going to have to go back to pick up pieces from that, and particularly to pick up, not so much the tactics of the civil rights movement, because I think we’ve used those over and over and over again and some of them no longer serve us, but the spirit of being new human beings — the transformative spirit — and to develop a more prophetic vision.

I don’t think movements are going to come out of the organizations we have now. I think it’ll come out of creating small spaces where great conversations and intellectual activity and art and then action occurs. And then those will begin to flow and create cultural change. One of the things that could be a cradle for that is this idea of beloved community that is infused, not with mushiness and not just with religiosity, but with a combination of politics, sort of the combination of, at its best, of mind, body, and spirit, and how we might create for ourselves new ways of living and new ways of being with one another, and new ways of accessing our full humanity.
“I Have to Stand In Witness against this Madness.”

Achebe Betty Powell

July 2004
Achebe Powell has been a “drum major for justice” for over four decades. Like many black women, Powell’s consciousness of oppression and her passion for social justice was born out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. But it was the women’s movement, her connection to feminism, which enveloped her in the next two decades. Like many lesbians of color, Powell’s political commitments fell across a broad spectrum of issues. While the women’s movement is where she found a strategic place to center lesbian issues with a focus on race and racism, she worked with the LGBT community in organizations like the Gay Academic Union and the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays. As a feminist, she continually challenged the racism and the homophobia of the mainstream feminist organizations and their leadership. As an organizer and an orator, Powell played key leadership roles in developing organizations for lesbians of color, such as Salsa Soul Sisters and the Astraea Foundation. Her fierce determination, her vision of freedom for all people, and her unceasing commitment to human rights have always lived at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Her life shows us the richness of these movements, the ways that they overlapped and intersected, and the significant ways that lesbians of color, like Powell, advanced an anti-racist social justice agenda in the arenas of feminism and LGBT liberation movements.

The 1977 International Women’s Year conference in Houston was a watershed moment for the nascent lesbian rights movement and a moment of national recognition for Powell. After the United Nations declared 1975 International Women’s Year, Congresswomen Bella Abzug, Patsy Mink, and Margaret Heckler introduced legislation to fund a national women’s conference that would take place in Houston, Texas in 1977. More than 2000 women attended as delegates, representing various communities and regions. Though few right-wing women had been elected as delegates, 15,000 stop-ERA supporters showed up as part of a rival gathering, calling the IWY conference “immoral” and “ungodly.” At the conference, a 26-plank “National Plan of Action” was debated and adopted. The rights of poor women, women of color, disabled women, and young and old were affirmed. The lesbian rights platform created the most controversy. Amidst the festive “We Are Everywhere” balloons, delegates from Mississippi hung their heads in prayer, holding signs that said “Keep them in the closet.”

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Up until this point, the mainstream women’s movement had kept lesbian issues at arm’s length, fearing the “lavender herring” would be the downfall of the liberal feminist agenda. But in 1977, lesbians attended the IWY conferences in force and by the time they arrived in Houston, a lesbian rights platform was well-formulated and ready for presentation to the entire delegation. The resolution called for anti-discrimination legislation, a repeal of anti-gay penal codes, and lesbian mothers’ rights. Even Betty Friedan spoke in favor of the plank, offering an apology for her role in the gay/straight split within the women’s movement. Amid cheers and balloons, the mood was victorious at the same time as it was contentious. Many of the Houston delegates, nicknamed the Schlaflies, were not in favor of lesbian rights. (Achebe) Betty Powell, a seasoned activist and great orator, took the national stage for the first time. Powell spoke in support of the lesbian rights platform:

This lesbian invisibility, like the invisibility of all minorities, negatively perceived by society has for so long, too long now, fostered only ignorance of our persons, our values, our actual lifestyles, which are as rich and diverse as we are in number. And also ignorance of the effects of legal, social, and economic discrimination on our lives.

But we’re all of us, all women, moving into a new day now. Black, brown, red, yellow, and white, old, young, imprisoned and disabled, we’re beginning to see ourselves and each other more clearly. And clearest of all is the fact that the oppressions that we suffer, as distinct and varied as they are, stem almost universally from simply being woman in this world. For the woman labeled lesbian in a male defined society, we are not only denied, but despised and made to suffer deeply because we love another human person of the same gender, and most importantly, because we have not given our primary love and affection, like commitment and support – to humans of the opposite gender, that is men. For this unpardonable offense—love—and this alone, lesbians live daily under the threat of legal sanction and the reality of social ostracism. Just as lesbians who are feminist cannot, and will never, separate our struggle or withhold our support from the struggles of all women and oppressed people, we hope you will support the resolution before you.  

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44 Powell was born Betty Jean Kelly and took the last name Powell when she married. Subsequent to our interview, she changed her name to Achebe Betty Powell.
While women of color were well-represented at Houston, the lesbian contingent was primarily white. Committed to lesbian feminism, Powell was often one of the few lesbians of color in lesbian settings or organizations. In the *Lesbian Tide*’s coverage of Houston, the periodical announced the formation of a new lesbian organization, one that would build on the energy and successes in Houston. The National Lesbian Organization (formed by Ivy Bottini, Jeanne Cordova and others) was endorsed by a couple dozen lesbian activists, including Powell, who is tagged in the article as a “Black Feminist,” the only endorser singled out racially, and one of the few women of color to support the new organization.

Powell talks about tokenism in her interview for *Word Is Out*, the documentary film chronicling the lives of 26 gay men and lesbians that premiered in 1977. In Powell’s transcript, which was included in the book version of the same title, she says, “As a black lesbian-feminist involved in the movement, often people try to put me in the position of speaking for all black lesbians. I happen to be a black lesbian among many, and I wouldn’t want to be seen as ‘this is how all black lesbians are.’ … There are few blacks in the gay movement, in that there is a polarity in the general society. And so I find myself very much alone in many instances.”46 This kind of isolation was reflected in Powell’s involvement with early movement organizations like the Gay Academic Union and the National Gay Task Force.

Founded in New York City in 1973 by activists closely associated with the Gay Activists Alliance, The Task Force has consistently been the most progressive national organization in LGBT politics. According to historian John D’Emilio (who has been involved with the Task Force off and on as a board member and staff person for the past few decades), the hallmark of the organization has been its ability to straddle insider-outsider politics. He writes, “It lobbied and it agitated. It negotiated and it mobilized. It supported breaking the law and changing the law. It tinkered with the system to effect small immediate changes, and it expressed a commitment to a more expansive vision of social justice.”47 Indeed it is this flexibility that has allowed the organization to endure these almost 40 years and to retain its leadership role in the LGBT community.

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Along those lines, the Task Force has always shown leadership on gender issues. Gender parity on the board, for example, existed from the organization’s founding and Jean O’Leary, founder of Lesbian Feminist Liberation in New York City, became the organization’s co-director in 1976. O’Leary’s leadership (and her representation on the President’s IWY commission) forced the organization to deal directly with lesbian rights in a way that other gay organizations in the 1970s did not. Powell devoted many years to the Task Force board in the 1970s and early 80s, during which her partner, Virginia Apuzzo, was the organization’s director. And while Powell relished the opportunity to work with other women activists there on important campaigns like the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness, Powell was often the lone woman of color in a leadership position and was becoming increasingly aware of the need for an intersectional analysis and strategy.

Always working on multiple fronts, Powell enthusiastically greeted the emergence of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973. Founded by Flo Kennedy, activist lawyer, Eleanor Homes Norton, the New York City Human Rights Commissioner, and Margaret Sloan, editor at *Ms.* Magazine, the NBFO began as a conference to address and share what it meant to be black and female.\(^48\) The idea for the organization emerged from the 1973 conference and the first national black women’s organization dedicated to eliminating the dual oppressions of racism and sexism was born. The group’s first regional conference, held later that year, drew notable African American feminists such as Shirley Chisholm and Alice Walker. The enthusiasm generated did not prove to be a match for the entrenched external and internal forces that would challenge NBFO’s existence. African American women were reluctant to attach themselves to “women’s lib” and were deeply involved in racial justice and nationalist movements in their own communities. More established black women’s organizations like sororities and church auxiliaries remained distant and white feminist organizations continued to shrink from addressing racism. By 1975, the organization was in decline, but the full impact of their existence just beginning. The NBFO showed the potential for black women’s collective power, cultivated leadership, and legitimized the women’s movement as the province of women of color.\(^49\) Powell found the energy infectious and


energizing, a brief experience but one that gave her the opportunity to use her voice in a new and profound way.

Frustrated with the limitations of the predominantly white women’s movement, Powell sought out community and like-minded allies whose work was cross-issue, with racial justice at the fore. One of those organizations was the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays. Founded in 1978 and the primary organizer of the Third World Conference held in Washington DC in 1979, the NCBLG was key in smoothing the way for people of color’s participation in the first March on Washington for gay rights in October, 1979. Though short lived, the organization was one of the first to initiate HIV/AIDS prevention strategies in the African American community and opened doors for other queer people of color organizations.

Powell’s first foray into lesbian of color organizing was Salsa Soul Sisters, an outgrowth of the Black Lesbian Caucus of the GAA, formed in 1974, and now called African Ancestral Lesbians United for Social Change. Though she was part of the group’s founding, she did not put much energy into the organization thereafter, owing to the group’s more social, rather than political, focus. She understood the need for black and Latina women to come together; but Powell needed more than consciousness-raising and a place to socialize. She needed to do something.

Powell was involved with the Astraea Foundation from the start. In 1977, eight women got together to talk about the need for funding for women and girls. Beva Eastman and Nancy Dean, two women of wealth and part of the founding group, were confident that funds could be raised. The group, all lesbians, had a strong consciousness about race. Noting that there were only two women of color in the room, this initial board interrupted their planning in favor of finding more women of color to join in the work. Astraea’s commitment to inclusion and diversity is unparalleled in this movement. And the foundation has gone on to a kind of success that the founders may not have imagined. In 2009, the now Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Social Justice dispensed $2.2 million around the globe. Working with Astraea was pivotal for Powell. She was able to apply her keen intersectional analysis, her oratorical skills, thrive in the company of other like-minded women, and ultimately be an integral part of an organization that has changed the movement and the face of philanthropy.

After a brief period working with Barbara Smith and Kitchen Table Press (Powell was the operations manager), Powell embarked on her career in anti-oppression organizational
development work. Along with Charlotte Bunche and others from the Women’s Tribune Center, Powell took her skills and passion to international conferences, such as the 1980 mid-decade conference on women in Copenhagen and the Encuentros Feminista Latina y del Caribe that took place in Latin America in the 1980s. Powell facilitated dialogues, organized black women’s caucuses, and continued pressing for antiracism work within the progressive women’s movement. No longer satisfied with her teaching career at Brooklyn College, Powell set out on her own to translate these experiences into a successful consulting career doing racial justice and anti-oppression work with organizations and institutions.

Of the change Powell has witnessed in her lifetime, she says, “I want to rejoice, probably even more than I really fully can bring myself to rejoice about (the progress gay and lesbian people have made.) So my vision of what’s possible by us struggling and standing in witness against the madness is borne out by so much change that has occurred. What has changed is my clear-eyed gaze on how far the prize is for black people in this country. Not even just the same amount of struggle, even more struggle. And the prize remains. I just have to keep fighting.”

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Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted JULY 6 and 7, 2004 with:

ACHEBE BETTY POWELL

by: KELLY ANDERSON

Brooklyn, New York

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Betty Jean Powell at her new home in
Crown Heights, Brooklyn, on July 6, and this is the first day of
interviewing for the Voices of Feminism Project. We’ll do a full life
history so why don’t you first start by talking about your grandparents
on either side.

POWELL: My grandfather was just a major part of my life, at least this is the
narrative that I tell of myself and I have no reason to disbelieve it. The
absolute facts of it all might not be — you know, if you went back and
had in fact some way of looking at the history — but the experiential,
what I took in from his presence, was someone who was very exacting
and very, sort of, taken with me, so that the two combination was so I
got that kind of exacting thing of he wanted me to, like, you know, stand
tall and speak, in particular, the speaking.

He had been a minister himself. In those days, it was called — he
was an AME preacher, African-Methodist-Episcopal preacher, and he
was very much a rhetorician. But I just remember him sort of saying,
“Stand up. Stand up, daughter. Stand up.” And he’d be in his
wheelchair, so I’m just a little at his knee, and he used to take that cane
and lift up my chin. “Put your head up. Put your head up. Put your chest
back.” And he’d — I could feel the poke, just so gently, of his cane and
that little rubber tip poking me to stand up straight. And project, he’d
say, “Project.”

So, my grandfather, who came from that line, in terms of tracing my
history, his father was — came out of slavery in North Florida and had
actually been a preacher in the slave tradition, that is, so that he was
taught — and that was not the big thing the family emphasized when it
told the story, it was that, and because he was, they had made him a
preacher, given him the slave Bible, you know, with its selected
passages and whatever. He was taught to read and write.

And the story that we get in our family is that when great-great-
grandpa came out of slavery and made a beeline for the Freedmen’s
Bureau to “learn figurin’,” is how everybody said it, which was, they
didn’t teach him math. And so he wanted to know math because he
wanted to own his own store, general store. So that’s what he went for, and the story is he actually had a general store in what would have been Live Oak Houston, Florida, up there on the border between Georgia, there, during the time of Reconstruction.

And it was fairly successful, so he moved it to the crossroads, in a time where the stage wagon came through and they came through from the mill and so forth, the intersection there in town, and became, the term used was Postmaster General of North Florida, which meant he got to sort the mail and by what was then not zip codes but whatever, by farm plots, and deliver it to folks.

But that actually was — I always take that as an important piece of signaling a desire and the possibility of coming into full citizenship, of being a part of community, of really — the kind of thing that even to this day in some — in ways that are not a given, not that it doesn’t happen. I mean, I just got off the phone with the post office and, you know, black people work in the post office and there are postal, you know, managers and all kinds of stuff. But in terms of taking leadership in community, it was just so clear that that’s where he was headed in being a merchant and all that.

And I say that that’s where he was headed because came, I guess it was the Compromise of 1890 or just before that, even, where it was clear that the Southerners were saying to them, to the North, get out, and the North was beginning to pull out. Jim Crow laws were already being put in place and lynchings were beginning to take place. The story of my family is that my great-grandfather’s store was burned down to the ground. He was told to go back, that he wouldn’t be lynched because, in a sense, the system needed him and they didn’t say it in these words, but he was to go back to preaching and sort of keep his folks in line. And it seems that that’s what he did. And he had five sons, my grandfather was one of them, and five daughters. His sons were all preachers. The daughters — I think three of them were teachers.

My roots are, on that side, are definitely in Florida. Florida, and then Georgia. My father was from Georgia, Macon. And my father’s father I never knew. He and my grandfather on that side were separated from my grandmother when I was born, so I never knew him. But my grandmother on my father’s side, ooooh. She was the matriarch. She was the matriarch of both families. It was like, Old Lady Kelly, they called her. [laugh] Ella Kelly. [laugh]

And it was not always very pleasant for my mother because, in fact, I was actually a love child. My mother and father were not married, and part of that was my grandmother’s doing, is that she did not want my father to marry my mother. My mother was older than my father, by ten years, and my grandmother was very much a — I came to live in Germany later in my life because my father was in the military, and I learned the word “streber” which means striver, and it’s beyond, it’s like, with intensity, and real — my grandmother was a streber, you know, it was just about climbing the ladder.
So she had plans for her son and it was not about marrying an older woman who was, at that time, a maid, a housekeeper. So she came from a good a family and all that stuff, and preachers, but still, it was not the right match.

And so the best for me, was — I had this loving family on my mother’s side and the best for me was, from her point of view, was that — and I would definitely have the experience of this loving family, the Kelly’s, and so I had to be brought to her every Friday afternoon, and I stayed through Sunday, and it was with — everybody went to the same church, our families went to the same church, and that was a major part of our lives. It was an organizing principle. St. Paul A.M.E. church. So my mother saw me again on Sunday morning in church.

But this part of the family, the Kelly’s, was very much an instrumental part of my life. My aunt in that family — in that household lived the grandmother and my father’s sister, my Aunt Jo and her two children, those are my cousins, Julius and Ella, and my Aunt Jo had, of course, the training of her mother, was this streber thing in her — my Aunt Jo, you just, she was a — everybody was a maid. She was a maid. And then, she learned upholstery and then she knew that she wanted to be a nurse, and she always said to me that I was going to be a doctor. She just told me, “You’re going to be a doctor.” Medicine was her big thing. But this is how I got all this streber thing in that household. It was, like, you will go far.

ANDERSON: So, tell me how your parents met.

POWELL: Actually, I think it was some kind of church affair, but I don’t have it clear in my head what kind of affair.

ANDERSON: She’s in northern Florida, he’s in –

POWELL: No, I’m sorry. Now, they’ve all — Miami was a great central place for people migrating from different parts of Florida and Georgia and other southern places.

ANDERSON: OK, so they find each other in Miami.

POWELL: They find each other in Miami.

ANDERSON: And your father’s not yet in the service?

POWELL: And my father is not yet in the service but clearly headed there. And you know, within a nanosecond, there he is. And my memory of my father is basically, of being, that’s my memory of my father, my father is in the Army. And it’s a good memory in that my mother very much cultivated a connecting, you know, with him, in that sense.
So, you know, during the war, I just have a sense, I mean, I’m 2, 3, 4, and 5 years old, but by the time, maybe I was 5 or 6, I was in kindergarten when I wrote my first letter to him. I can remember, because I’m barely writing, I mean, printing, and I’m remembering my mother letting me, or actually, making me write out the whole address, so this APO became a very significant thing to me, like, my father had [laughs], and all the whole numbers that went with that. So, but the thing is, the pattern of communicating with my father every week, writing a letter to my father every week, Sunday night, writing letters, that my mother did, and I would sit and write a letter.

And receiving things from — at this time, it’s post-war so we’re going to ’46 and my father was in Japan, he was in Libya — I’m getting, you know, gifts from these places, these far away places. Korea.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and you see him very seldomly.

POWELL: I see him every two years until I then go to live with him, which was a major, major family decision. In that, my father asked me, asked my mother if I could come and live with him so that — the big thing was that she could travel and that would be an education and, et cetera, et cetera. And it was a hard decision. I can remember getting totally excited about the idea, but knowing that I had to play it really cool and not just wait, just wait, and so it would be listening. The conversations that went on in my memory were many. And my Uncle AC coming and sitting on the porch and talking with my mother and my Aunt Jo, coming, sitting on the porch, talking to my mother. My Aunt Na, and me, like, listening behind the screen door and all of the various and sundry opinions. But the theme that seemed to keep coming up, “Well, Rachel, the child will get an education and, you know, she’ll probably go overseas.” That was the term in those days.

And finally, the decision was made that I could go. And it was, you know, pivotal for shaping my life. We lived in California for a minute and then Texas and then we were in Germany for several years. And that was, like, that travel, that expansion of self. I mean, I had that sense when we went to California, when we would travel across country, and I got that very clear at 8 that the world was much bigger than Miami and much more possibility than the kind of — I didn’t know the term racist, it was just segregated and tight and whatever, my life, I didn’t know that. On some level, I didn’t know it because I lived in a colored section of town and to me, it was that same thing, what is it, Richard Wright, I heard on the radio, “I lived in the ghetto and all the while I thought it was home.” So, it was just home and it was a very rich home and very nurturing and very, you know, everything, from school to church to all the little organizations and teas and speaking things. But I knew that there was something really, really special that would happen if I got to travel with my dad, and sure enough, it did, and I just had this expansive life.
So when I go to live with my father, it’s like, Oh, I’ve known you all my life but now I really get to know you. And that was the way he felt about me, and so it was pretty idyllic, too, in its own way, though there was some real, I can’t say that I really kicked up my first and lasting, kind of, dance around guilt and so forth of being — I mean, I was not only guilty of being away from my mother and feeling like I had abandoned my mother, but that I had abandoned my whole neighborhood. I used to put it all out of my mind during the day and at night, I guess, began my insomnia, when I was about 14 or 15. I would lie awake thinking about the whole neighborhood and I would just go through the names, you know, Alphonse and Rosemary and Lavina and all of them and I wished they were all here. I knew I was living a charmed life and I wished that they had the opportunities, and that would go to guilt kind of thing. And, you know, I learned, and years later, it — a little about survivor guilt because it also came into — comes into play around when we get to the 60s and you know, the black civil rights struggle and the whole notion of, well, You didn’t grow up in the ghetto and you didn’t grow up, you know, in the projects. Or, You’re not really, really black, and that was a big thing.

ANDERSON: I’m interested in what kind of impact do you think being raised by mostly a father during your adolescence and teenage years [had] versus being with a mother. I mean, can you speak a little bit about the difference between being a girl in your mom’s home versus being a girl and a young woman in your dad’s home?

POWELL: Well, I would say that I wouldn’t really frame it as being raised mostly by my father even though it was in my formative years, because the foundation was so strong when I went to him. I’m 12 years old, and I have gotten everything from Miss Rachel. I mean, I am, you know, Rachel Harris’ daughter. And all the other people that were a part of that extended family that was so rich with aunts and uncles and cousins and the church and the people who know you and love you.

So I was coming to my father on a very strong foundation already of socialized into a way of being. And then, it’s almost like my father did the icing on the cake, and while it’s very formative years, I didn’t go through a whole lot of adolescent Sturm und Drang and whatever, whatever. I was a very mature kid. And I think, though I wasn’t raised military family from, you know, in terms of all those early coming up years, there was something about the modeling around me of the kids that I grew up with, which was certainly in that day, the 50s, military kids were very mature and we went through all the teenage stuff, but I didn’t have any great — you know, I was already menstruating. I started menstruating early, so that thing had already been, that phenomena had already taken place.
There was a difference in that I was freer. I owned myself. Now, my father had rules and regulations and stuff, but he totally trusted me that I was going to do the right thing and be where I had to be. Of course, you’re in a protected context of as a lot of our life was — in some ways, fortunate and unfortunate — the American ghetto, let’s say, especially when we lived in Germany. But even that ghetto was pretty wide and broad, especially — we lived in Mannheim for two years and then we lived in Heidelberg.

And in Mannheim — it was about 18, 20 miles or something from Heidelberg — when I was first in the ninth grade, I had to take the school bus into — and then we would stay in Heidelberg and do things. I’m 14 years old. But we would go to the American teenage club and the American snack bar and you know, you did your stuff and then, you know, you came home. You had your club things. You had this and that.

Then we moved to Heidelberg and we lived in what would be a kind of suburb — if Heidelberg were Manhattan we probably lived like about this far, into Freudenheim. And you’d take a — the bus was a huge part of military transport, you know, back and forth. It wasn’t like, folks picking you up in cars and stuff, and you had to know the schedules because they stopped running at a certain time. There were times when we missed the last bus.

And one time in particular was really, really bad and, you know, I’m like 15 or 16, and walking in — because we totally missed the bus, we tried to take the Autobahn, which is the tram, the trolley, and stuff. We didn’t know where we were going. We ended literally in Mannheim from Heidelberg but it was in an area, we didn’t know it. Someone comes up to us and he says, “What are you girls” — there are, like, five or six of us, American teenagers. The bobby socks, the crinolines, the whole thing, you know, but that was a safe time. It’s 1954, 55. He says, “What are you girls doing here?” and it was, like, 1 o’clock in the morning. He says, “Do you know where you are?” and we go, “No.” He goes, “You’re on black market square.” The black market was a big thing, you know, with selling goods and stuff. And he says, “Where do you live?”

So we told him where we lived and he showed us how to get home. I can’t even remember. But whatever we took, we ended up having to get off of it and walk, because I remember we were walking a whole long way along this side road and we didn’t know it. And finally we see the big sign, you know, actually you get a load of where I lived. This is to tell you about the American ghetto. You’re riding along the German Autobahn and you see a big sign that says Patrick Henry Village. So, we see the sign, we’re so happy, and I lived on Lexington and Bunker Hill.

So, anyhow, I’m sneaking in because, oh, god, I know that I’m going to be killed. And so I come into the living room and I see my father sleeping on the couch, so I duck down low, you know, you’re doing something and you’re going past the couch. My father said, “Jeannie.” My name was Betty Jean and he called me Jeannie or Jean.
“Yes, dad.” And so I was grounded, I don’t know for how long, a couple of weeks.

But that kind of trust, and yet responsibility, etc., if you say, in terms of living in my dad’s home, it was, like, I think, a marker, if you get a sense of me, who I was, and then the relationship to my father. It was a very special thing, relating to a father, but I didn’t know how to capture, different in his household. It was almost an extension of my mother and the two of them together, though this was a male.

So, to give you an example of the two of them communicating and it’s like they’re present. I decided at the age of 14, we still lived in Mannheim, that I wanted to convert to Catholicism. It wasn’t a quick decision. I had already been thinking about this back in Florida when I was home when I was 12. Some distant family had come through, stayed with us. I picked up the catechism. I was at a time where I was really questioning, you know, What is all of this about? I mean, it’s very Jungian in that Jung does a whole number on conversions and so forth, of the adolescent, who’s really trying to figure out the meaning of life. And I was very seriously into trying to figure that out and I opened their catechism and it was the Baltimore Catechism. You know, Who made you? God. Why? To know, love, and serve Him. How many angels are there? It was, like, ooooh, these folks have the answers. There seemed to be such an order to it.

And so by the time I’m with my dad, this is another instance of how I felt freer, that I could actually then say to him, I want to convert to Catholicism and I need to take lessons, whatever, instructions and stuff. And of course, you know where I’m coming from. Now, my great-grandfather out of slavery, AME church, you know, all the ministers in my family, my grandfather –

ANDERSON: And your dad’s going to become one, too.

POWELL: And he doesn’t know that at the time, but, you know, I’m just saturated with African-Methodist-Episcopal, you know, positive — have never heard anything negative about Catholics but it’s totally out of the realm of our experience. That’s also what I was seeking. Always, like, out of the realm of my experience and pushing. But I also very sincerely felt like, there’re answers here. This satisfies my need to know how the world works and what God is and all that sort of thing. So, my dad says, “Well, we’ll have to ask. We have to talk to your mother about this.”

So, he writes my mother and says, “What shall we do? She wants to convert.” I thought for sure, that’s like a no. I’m going to have to wait till I’m 20 or something. And my mother writes back and I’ll never forget. I’ve said this so many times to different people in telling this story, but it’s absolutely how it went. She wrote in the letter, “Well, Jesse, if that’s where Betty Jean thinks she can worship God best, then we’ll have to let her go.” And they did. And so my father picked me up
after instructions, because by then, I think by the time I was taking these instructions, we had moved to Heidelberg.

Heidelberg was, and still is, the United States Army in Europe Headquarters, so there’s this huge chapel there. The chaplain, I’ll never forget, Daniel P. Che. Father Daniel P. Che gave me my instructions. My father met him, was very [impressed,] you know, whatever, and my first communion, my dad was there.

ANDERSON: Did it live up to your expectations at that time? Not as an adult, but at that time?

POWELL: At that time, oh, totally, totally, totally, totally. At that time, right through, I had declared that I absolutely had to go to a Catholic college once I was, you know, back home in Florida and everybody’s going to, like, Howard University and Hampton Institute, and even some of the other white colleges, by this time it’s ’58, and I have to go to a Catholic women’s college and they’re all looking at me like, You’re really strange. And I do, I end up at the College of St. Catherine and again, it’s like, This is totally right for me. And what was so right and so perfect was the particular college, the particular group of educators, I call them, who happened to be nuns, that I met, because it really helped me on the path that I feel was the path for me, which was going to be away from the Catholic Church. And I say helped me in that, these — I always say, and I will put this on record, that the nuns, they were the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondolet, a French order that came over here after Louisiana Purchase, starting down in Louisiana. And came up the Mississippi following the loggers, the expansion of the country. And so they built schools and hospitals all the way up to the top of the Mississippi River. Yeah, the mouth starts up in northern Minnesota, and so they had a hospital and a college there and high schools.

And actually, my college was the College of St. Catherine. Font Bonne Hall was a very elite girls’ school. Elite, you know, I don’t use those words so easily, but it was just really, in terms of quality of the education. I find out many years later, by the way that I came to be connected with her, that Kate Millet went to Font Bonne Hall. And so she was one of those little teenage girls on our campus who came to high school.

But that college, these nuns then, to come back to them, the ones who are now the professors and administrators of St. Catherine were, I always said, they weren’t really nuns to me. They were libertines in drag. [laughs] And they were. They were so committed to excellence and quality of mind. And art and music. And this is how I got through — like, Ma, I have to take piano lessons because Sister Lucina and Sister Mary Davida, they were just fascinating. Mary Davida was the head of the music department, Sister Lucina, and they played piano beautifully. They used to give concerts, you know, for us at different
times. Sister Lucina played violin. She also was a piano teacher. I took my piano lessons from them.

So anyhow, I’m just trying to show you the quality of who these women were, which wasn’t about Catholicism in terms of some kind of fundamentalist Catholicism. They chose who would be the actual chaplain and they made a career decision that they didn’t do Jesuits. Jesuits were intellectual but they were too hellfire and brimstone, so they would use them for retreats. But they used the Dominicans for chaplains. So Father Bullock was their choice because he could appreciate Sister Mona, who was the head of the art department and one of my, you know, totally close idols. I did, like, four years of art, and art history and everything and she sent me off to New York. I came to graduate school with a list, art off the beaten track in New York. Sister Mona was, like, wild, and she would design the vestments for Father Bullock. So you’re kneeling at mass and you’re looking up at the altar and you think you’re looking at a Picasso painting.

The shaping took over from where my father left off, in terms of expansion, expansion. Here it was expansion of mind, expansion of spirit, expansion of political view and a sense of responsibility.

ANDERSON: It sounds like a real continuation of your grandparents’ legacy as well. I mean, the tapping of the cane, but also your grandmother, and it sounds like a really good choice you made in terms of the same values, standards, commitments, excellence.

POWELL: Yes, yes, yes. And these things happen by choice, coming together with the fortuitousness or whatever, because while I had applied for, you know, more than eight or nine colleges at that time, and was about to come up to New York for an interview in Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, when I get a call from — my mother actually took the call and I came home she told me about it — I had also applied for scholarship funds from a group called Catholic Scholarships for Negroes, Incorporated, which was basically a family in Springfield, Mass., the Putnam Family.

And Mrs. Putnam took a very direct interest in those who — you know, I had scored high on the SATs [then known as the College Boards] and I was getting the full scholarship from them, and she was the one that called and said, would I consider the College of St. Catherine, because Sybil Evans — I’ll never forget, I had never met her but I know her name, because I replaced Sybil Evans as the Negro. I mean, they actually would never have thought of it in that way, but obviously, that’s what it was. But the Putnams had supported Sybil, who was graduating and they knew — I had already gotten the scholarship from them through my scores and stuff, but they knew then that the college itself was then opening up that full-tuition scholarship, you know, books and everything, for another, what did they call it, Deserving Negro Student. So I said, “Well, I never heard of it and I
I never thought of Minnesota,” but again, it was like, Oh, now, college to me is travel. You go. That’s going someplace because I’d never been there. And then I read about them and I thought they sound really as good as all the other places that I was looking into.

ANDERSON: And this Catholic fund supported you for the four years?

POWELL: They did. They just gave you, at that time it was like $1000 a semester, which was a big thing, to cover your books. But then, what Ms. Putnam was so good at was that, of looking around to see what other things supplemented, because theirs was just a small family fund. They gave you the top and then, so that then the college gave me the whole tuition.

ANDERSON: Right. So that was part of your decision to go but not the entire –

POWELL: It was part of the decision to go but not entirely, because I was getting offers other places too, but the fact that I could talk about this place with Mrs. Putnam and then it ended up being, like, who knew? Who knew from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota.

ANDERSON: I hadn’t heard of it before.

POWELL: Oh, please, who knew that it would be two blocks from the Mississippi River and, you know, I love rivers, or that, even after I left, they were proving themselves totally in line with me. The College of St. Catherine became the site for — which is a big feminist thing — the base for Women Historians of the Midwest and they still meet there. They graduated some of the most radical women who have entered into the legislature of Minnesota as well as, there’s one in the U.S. Congress, and I don’t know, but they’ve just continued to be — and, years later, here I am now, a lesbian, living in Brooklyn, with my lover, Ginny Apuzzo, and we do many, many parties, benefits, in this wonderful place that we were fortunate to dwell in, that was a garden duplex, and so we had lots of parties and it would flow out into the garden.

And so, here we’re having a benefit for someone and one of the people that I’m talking to, haven’t seen in quite a while, Louise Fishman, who is an artist, and I first knew her in the Gay Academic Union, that’s how we first came out. And she says, “So, what’re you doing?” The chit chat. I said, “You’re still giving lectures and stuff on art?” She says, “Yes, I’m going to a small college in the Midwest and giving a thing.” And I said, “Oh, where?” She said, “Oh, you wouldn’t know it.” I said, “Try me.” I had no idea. I just said that. And she said, “Oh, it’s actually,” and then she’s going on describing it and she said, “Well, it actually has the only feminist art department in the country.” And da-da-da. And I’m going, I just knew that she was going to say — I said, “What is the name?” She said, “It’s the College of St. Catherine.”
said, “Louise, those are my women. Those are my libertines in drag. Of course, they would have the only feminist art department! Sister Mona!”

POWELL: So, that was just a major piece of the shaping of Betty Jean.

END TAPE 1
ANDERSON: Let’s backtrack to some of those stories that you’ve been talking about, and talk about the experiences of being black and female in some of those contexts. I’d to look at it from two angles: one is your experience of being black and female in those contexts, and the other is your awareness of the growing civil rights movement and what kind of information you were getting about that, particularly in the military: how that was starting to shape your thinking, how you talked about it in your family.

POWELL: Well, I’ll start — so interesting. There’s a story that I use, an anecdote that I use in the trainings that I do, the work that I do now in the facilitation in anti-oppression training and consulting and coaching and so forth, diversity is used the term often used. But there’s a Racial Justice Institute that is a part of my work. It’s a design that runs three days, part I, three days, part 2, and in one of the exercises, I give examples of when you became clear as a child that folks were treated differently based on gender, based on class, and based on race color.

The one story that I use based on race goes back to — I’m maybe just past preverbal, just getting into verbal, but I don’t read signs or anything, obviously, very well. Or didn’t even notice. I’m out there being in the world, and I remember that there is always a time when we would go into this different world. We’d go somewhere on the bus, well, not somewhere, it was called “downtown,” and you went downtown on a bus, across the railroad track, and you entered into a whole new world. Well, we knew it as Woolworth’s and Burdines, and whatever, whatever, but it was a very white world. That I was conscious of? Not in any frightening way or scary way, it just — you know, it was different.

But I do recall, and I tell the story that I remember, in terms of getting clear, I remember the feel of my mother’s fingernail running down the back of my neck as she yanked me away from the Whites-Only drinking fountain. So, it’s got to be, what, ’43, ’44, like that. My mother said nothing, but I got all the fear in that scraping of a fingernail down my neck. It didn’t hurt a lot, but you could feel it. And also the movement. My mother never handled me in that way, so I got all of her fear and I — well, I didn’t have words.

It only took a few years before I knew where to step, where not to go, where, you know, what to do and so forth. So that, clearly, I am informed by racism and segregation and a sense of other from a very early age, though because we are so contained, if you like, in the colored section of town, which is not a ghetto, but it has the class thing is there. There are poorer sections and, you know, we lived in a not-so-poor section but it wasn’t the middle class — it wasn’t where the teachers and the doctors and lawyers lived, either.
ANDERSON: Because your mother was working as a housekeeper?

POWELL Because my mother was working as a housekeeper. My father was in the military and sending allotment checks and so forth. My mother was saving like crazy but, we were just living a working-class life, you know, by and large, so we got to get things that were probably more middle class in certain material things. But the relationships — I would not be able to tell a story of my life and say that I had some kind of, um, consistent encounter with the white world that was hostile to me, you know, that I have got the racism, like, in my bones, as I am — that foundation from one until the time I’m 12, until I’m going to live with my father.

But I’m aware that, I mean, I’m just aware that there’s something very separate and very unjust that is going on and I really got it when we go to California and it’s not segregated, and we get to go to a park for the first time, and there’s a swimming pool and whatever, whatever. And I come back and I’m kind of on a little soapbox, literally on a box in my neighborhood and saying, “You know, we have to do something about it.” And I don’t even remember what it was do something about, but I just remember that.

And then my home — it was always so much about striving. I don’t remember getting the messages a lot about how unjust or unfair or whatever things were. And I’m going to take a leap now, though, because I’ll talk about the military later. But I’m going to come back to now, I’ve grown up and I’m, 11, 12, I go live with my father, I come back, I’m 17, and when I come back, and that last year in high school, at Booker T. Washington High School, which is all black, I’m in that same colored section of town, it’s ’56, 1956, and I am so aware of racism and because I’ve lived this very, you know, full and integrated life even with such difficulties which I’ll talk about. It was, like, Good Lord, what is this?

And so, immediately, there’s something, this fire jumps up, you know, begins to rise up in me, and I totally hook into the National Conference of Christians and Jews, which at that time in the South. One of their programs with high school kids was that in the segregated South, they would put out a call to white schools and to black schools — and that’s what it was at the time, just white and black — that youngsters who wanted to become a part of the youth program of NCCJ, which would bring white and black kids together under one roof and the aegis of NCCJ, before could come and learn about justice and — they never said racial justice — would learn about justice. We’d learn about justice, and I heard that over the PA system and it’s, like, Yeah, that’s for me. And with my few friends, we went. And it was a place to, where I had my first [political] learning experience where you actually talked about — at that time, it was called prejudice, it wasn’t called racism, it
was prejudice, and how we talked about it and how we had to fight, you
know, and find ways to, you know, work against, et cetera.

The civil rights movement’s not even in my head or in the air, but
obviously, the bus ride of Montgomery, boycott, and everything in ’54
had been taking place, but I’m not hearing any of that. I’m — what I
was really working with was, like, what you could do.

My first mentor in justice around that context — well, my first
mentor in justice was really my father, because the things that we had to
do as we walked through the world — and I will tell you some of those
incidents. My father would be teaching me lessons about justice when I
was 10, 11, 12 years old. But a formal kind of mentoring came from
Max Karl, a Jewish man who was the regional director of NCCJ, and,
you know, he just taught us about the fact that you get to actually fight
for justice, you get to have that as a part of your life and the struggle,
and even when you don’t know how. And I remember as kind of being
in a state of, like, Well, what? What will we do?

And so we used to actually — what he, the NCCJ arranged with
other groups that wanted to do this was the paring of a black kid and a
white kid who would go out to speak, and it was called Youths Speak
Against Prejudice, and we were part of this little program, and we
would go to all kinds of conferences and whatever and you would just
— you would speak out, and we had, like, this whole thing that we
would do and it was just so intense.

ANDERSON: It was so radical for that time. You must have been monitored by the
FBI.

POWELL: Oh, I want to tell you who we were monitored by. We were monitored
by the Board of Ed, because we decided that we wanted to do something
more than just even do the speak-outs kind of thing, and so we decided
that we needed to meet outside of NCCJ. This is, you know, white kids
and black kids who were — I mean, we were so — so serious. Thank
God, thank God, we were so serious about this thing. We have to do
more than just this speak thing.

So we started meeting at each other’s homes. We’d meet at a white
kid’s home, then we’d meet at a black kid’s home. And then — and we
decided that one of the things we were going to do, we were going to
volunteer together to “man,” we’d call it, the mobile blood units and so
forth that were downtown, but we were going to do that together as, you
know, white-and-black-kids, integration things. And we went and we
made out the application and so forth, and the people laughed at us.
They said, “What are you trying to do? This is a joke.” And I remember
them saying, “Those Jews put you up to this?” We kept meeting and
kept trying to figure out. We were all, by this time, everybody’s
comparing, who’s applying to what colleges for what and for SAT and
what — we should all try to go to an integrated college and all this stuff.
We get a message — I’ll never forget, comes over the PA system, the names of all the kids in our Booker T. Washington High School, the names of all the kids who were part of NCCJ. Our names were called and it was said, “Would you report immediately to the guidance counselor’s office?” And I didn’t know. I thought, what — [two voices] are they going to let us? They’ve heard that we’ve been trying to do this thing and maybe they’re going to help us or something.

No, the word was, to us, we’ve gotten word from the Board of Ed that some of you kids have been meeting together outside of NCCJ in each other’s homes, and you know that white and black are not [to meet] together. It’s illegal, they said to us. And I thought there was something wrong with that. It couldn’t be illegal to gather in somebody’s home. But for them, this was public space because we were children, they owned us in a sense. I mean, you owned where, how, children go and come. So a private home became a public space you could not meet [in].

So I was just really disappointed and then angered, but I was more angry than disappointed, and all of us were angry when he said they, you know, the Board of Ed has learned that you’ve been meeting and it’s illegal and you will not be able to do that anymore. Well, we thought, well, they could say that but we will do — I remember that running through my head and all of us later, we were comparing notes, like, we thought, OK, so they say, but we’ll do what we want. But then, it was followed by, “And if you continue to do this, none of you will graduate from high school. You will not get a diploma from the State of Florida that you graduated.” And all of us, these smart serious kids, well you have to go to college, your life. And so, it was like, whoa, got you by the — gotcha, gotcha. And I — and they were saying we were not to talk to these kids, we were not to see them at any time, except in NCCJ. The white kids were called in and they were told the same thing.

I mean, this seems like so nothing compared to people being beaten over the head and hosed and jailed and so forth. But for us, in ’56, it was, like, that was the universe of trying to figure out some way to buck this system, to stand for justice. That was simply my experience that took me on to more engaged stuff.

And the irony of all of that was by this time, it was getting towards the end of the year and I had received — I had gotten notice that I was receiving a bronze medallion for brotherhood. It was called the Brotherhood Award from NCCJ and some officials from the city were going to give the awards and folks from my school were going to go and be, you know, really very proud of me and the whole thing. So we were trying to figure out, like, do I say no, that I don’t want to receive a thing and that, and we’re strategizing and now, that we would all — everybody would be there, and it was all over Miami Beach and Fontainebleau Hotel and the whole thing and that when I got that award,
all the black kids and the white kids would come up to the podium together and nobody could stop us, they had to drag us away, the police. So it was a whole big thing. And we got up and we made some kind of a statement there, about, like, we will never stop fighting to end prejudice.

So that was my — it was like an — if you’re talking about — the racism was there. I didn’t have, you know, I don’t have lashes on my back from it. I have lashes across my soul from it. So I experienced it in a very different way than somebody living in Mississippi or even somebody, maybe, who lived right there in Miami, especially the males, especially the males when they were in the wrong section of town.

My brother, being, you know, put in jail. Not by white police but by black police. Because my mother asked them to please give him the experience so that he won’t steal. My mother thought my brother was stealing at one point, but she didn’t want him to be caught by white cops, or ever put in a white jail, so she asked one of the black cops, who were only recent — you know, newly beginning to even have black police in the black neighborhood — to put my brother in jail for an overnight so that he could experience it, so he’d never do anything wrong, so he wouldn’t be caught by a white cop.

So I know it was there and people got it across their backs. I didn’t, but enough across my soul to know I have to stand in witness against this madness, and so I began in that little way there.

The racism that my father and I experienced was again much more social, not much more social, was social in that again, it wasn’t lashes across my back and we were cushioned by the middle-class context that we moved in in the military. But it was really humiliating, a lot of times. And again, so the soul beating was enough to know, for me to know that there — I knew that there were people who were getting, you know, the lashings in much more harsher forms.

But my father and I were sitting in California once — this is a time when my father gave me my first really big lesson, beyond just — for justice, it was about how I stand in the world, which totally informed my becoming a feminist and everything. We were in a restaurant in Monterey, we had gone down for a weekend, Monterey Bay, da-da-da, and Fisherman’s Wharf. It was ’50 — I don’t know what year it is, but it’s early 50s and so there’s, even in California, it’s like, you still keep your place, even though it’s more open, and you certainly don’t go off to a nice restaurant on the Fisherman’s Wharf. At that time, it was really nice.

But we go into this restaurant and we sit because my father wants — you know, we want to have lobster and we want to do seafood and all this stuff. And we sit, and we sit, and we sit, and it’s 10 minutes and its 20 minutes and nobody even comes, you know. And I know it was at least 20 minutes, it seemed like eternity, but certainly, after some lengthy time, I say to my dad, “Daddy, let’s go. We don’t belong here.” And I just wanted some way for us to escape this kind of, you know,
clear shame. It was, like, clearly, Yeah, we might be out of Florida and out of the South but — where we didn’t even think about going to a restaurant or anything —

And my father said to me a lesson that’s in my soul, it just vibrates in this moment, he said, “Jeanie, wherever you are in the world is where you belong. You sit right there.” And he went and got the manager. They did come over. They served us. We stayed and we ate. The tension was, like, you could cut it with a knife. They would have wished that we had gone away, but my father — and through that dinner, I remember him saying things, you know, to the effect that we will sit through this and you will have many other things to sit through, but this is a part of your owning yourself and owning the places and the spaces that you are in the world, and your right to be there, no matter how or what.

And so I remember those — that lesson being repeated as we moved through the world in other ways. And there was a thing that we did where, whenever we were going in someplace and we knew that we were probably were going to get some shit, pardon the expression, my dad would say, “All right, Jeanie,” you know, “heads up, eyes forward.” He got very military and, you know, we could make it kind of a joke and whatever. Like I was watching the parade, my father was parade master for a while in Germany, so every Thursday when they had the parade, it was like a big joke, you know, and they would pass by, right, it was military stuff. And so, because my father didn’t take himself that seriously in terms of the military, but he also did take himself very seriously. So he would say, you know, “Heads up, eyes forward. Are you ready?” and I’d say, “Yes.” “You ready, Jean?” and I’d say, “Yes.” And we’d go in. And it was like you’d have to, you know, get that stuff up.

So, specifically in the military, my father made a big attempt to cushion me from — it was more of the stuff that was happening to him, the promotions that he wasn’t getting. The times when he would be so angry and despairing. It would just come out in stories, and then blips, when he’d say, “Yeah, and Eisenhower couldn’t even come by to review us.” The troops when he was fighting in World War II, Eisenhower did not go to review the black troops, but it was before D-Day and he was, like, Yeah, he’ll just — and it was like it was such a big thing to my father then. He was giving his life for his country and the commander and general would not, you know. But he would go through all of this stuff: so they think that I’m going to be in Quartermaster Department all my life? I’m not standing for it, et cetera, et cetera. And I would almost feel my father come to tears when, you know, this man is feeling like, but it’s the system, it’s such a huge, a real big system.

But then I would see him conferring with other, you know, with Sergeant Murphy and Sergeant Brown who were his black fellow non-com officers at that time, and they were always strategizing about how
to get around the system and to get promotions and whatever. And I remember always feeling so sad because I knew that my white counterparts’ parents wouldn’t have to do that. I would go and — and they were my good friends. Again, you’re in the military and my class, you know, in the military school, there were always, like, maybe three or four black kids. And so a lot of my friends were white. And if I went home with my girlfriend, Barbara Peersall. Her father’s, you know, Colonel Peersall, and I would think, I loved him very much, and I would think, he’s not really as bright as my dad. How come my dad’s not a colonel? Now this again, is, like, really very precious. It’s like, Geez, Betty, you got to, like, really ruminate and have anxiety over whether or not your father was a colonel or a sergeant at the time, not exactly hardcore racism in your face. It is what I knew, what I, you know, directly experienced.

The times when I really, really got it was when we’d be sort of running about as kids and the MPs would stop us and they’d like — when they would be talking to white kids and so forth, there was no hands on your billy stick or whatever. The ways in which they sometimes would try to intimidate me, putting their hand on their billy stick and, What’s your father do? And you’d have to give your father’s rank and serial number and the whole thing. These were — in the military, the ways in which I as, really and I have to say, a really privileged army brat at that time, did experience some of the — you couldn’t even call it the boot of the racist prejudice, but I knew from friends of mine whose fathers were very much experiencing staying at, you know, well, PFCs didn’t really even have their families over there for the most part. But some kids whose fathers were not of the rank of my father, who just — it was like the class and the race thing that came, you know, together and they felt it even more.

So part of my coping mechanism was taking everything that I could from a white middle-class environment and context and very protected one in the military context, and trying to rationalize that somehow I was also helping the race. Again, it’s so hard for me to put this on record, because I’m feeling, as I’m trying to talk about this, a kind of — shallow is the word that I want but it’s not like, I’ve never been a shallow person internally, but a shallowness of — there’s something thin about me trying to describe the experiences of racism in my life in that, those moments in my life in that context, almost any time in my life because I have been especially spared a lot, while at the same time, I can tell you story after story of the insult to my human dignity.

So there was always, in those contexts of taking everything that I could get from those situations and trying to feel I was doing something for the race, a real consciousness that wherever I was, people were often working very hard to be OK about me being there. Or, if they weren’t working hard, they were experiencing the tensions of the people who were working hard.
Not always, always, always, and sometimes it was less that — many times it was less that when I was in the presence of just Germans, which is also another interesting piece of my life at that time, in that I did not know about the Holocaust when I lived in Germany. My discovering it when I’m 19 in college and confronting my father with, Why didn’t you ever tell me? And his saying, I never would have spoiled your childhood in that way. You were much too sensitive a child. Blah-blah-blah-blah. And I’d get angry with the Germans. I was angry that I ever liked Germans. I loved the Germans. I loved the German culture, et cetera, et cetera. It’s another little slight piece and I have made peace with that. I finally was able to actually go back to Germany in ’73. And have a fair number of German friends and everything because it was a part of my life, and know all their — you know, so much the struggle, of a lot of Germans with good conscience and a lot of the horror.

But at that time, part of what I’m feeling as a black human being in that context is I’m much more comfortable around all Germans, though they’re not without, coming up with some real zingers, in that, coming out, my father loved opera and that’s how I came to love opera and we used to go — I didn’t always like going, I would rather have been with my friends, you know, and stuff — but we used to go, certain seasons, every Saturday, the Heidelberg little operetta or whatever. And then the big opera would come down from Berlin, you know, like the Metropolitan.

And we’re coming out of the opera once, the first time I ever saw La Bohème, I guess. I can’t remember. And this woman, older German, literally grabs me, you know, by the arm, and she’s pulling me around and looking at the back of me, going, schwarte, schwarte. She’s rubbing my skin. Schwarte, schwarte. It was not the first time that anybody had kind of brushed up against my skin and going schwarte, you know, for black. But she was going schwarte and was handling me and looking behind me and saying something. I didn’t quite understand. My father got it. She was saying in German, “Where’s the tail?” Well, just as Hitler had, you know, Jews having horns and Hitler reinforced that, they were all — one of the myths was that blacks had tails. This old woman, on some level, believed that, you know. It was 50-something and she’s an older German woman so she’s lived before World War II, through World War II, blah-blah-blah, and she’s lookin’ for my tail. And my father says to her in his broken German, you know, “Just get away from us. Neither I nor my daughter have tails and we never will.” So, not exactly being cracked over the head with a billy club or a hose, but —

END TAPE 2
The 1960s, with this hour of tape, is what we want to talk about. Would you like to just start by talking about moving to New York and the change in your life that happened after you graduated from college?

Uh-hm. Well, end of college and I found myself in the process of deciding where to go to graduate school, which was at that time, you know, it was a given was that you were going to go on with your education, especially given the field that I had chosen, which was French Language and Literature — like, what do you do with it, with a BA. So I ended up choosing to go to Fordham University in New York City and that opened up for me, just even in my head at that time, several possibilities of again living — not again, but in my head, clearly always I wanted to be living large and expansively and so forth.

So here we were traveling, you know, now from Minnesota back to the Northeast but the notion that it was New York City. It’s, like, possibilities for life. And indeed it was. I got here and, you know, went to Fordham, got totally engaged in the life of New York in all kinds of ways, from your music, art, culture, and the politics.

The politics was the civil rights movement. And the civil rights movement was, let’s see, we’re talking ’62, and it’s New York, and the tensions that are here did not lend themselves to feeling like you were in a really cohesive organized piece of the civil rights movement but there were just parts of it here and there that you would get yourself engaged in.

And so I found myself, in a sense, what I describe as I was part of the peripheral civil rights things that were going on around, in particular, young people and youth. And I worked with — summers always found me in Harlem, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, working with what were called then the Street Store Academies and, I mean, they were just — the potential for educating young people who had been totally dismissed by the system, had been dropped through the cracks, et cetera, was just so clear that it found me engaged in protest and demonstrations at the school board for more access to their resources. Not within the school system itself, but to give support to the Store Front Academies, and so that was just a big push that was — it couldn’t have happened without the civil rights movement being percolating, and moving.

So I was engaged in that way, engaged in some of the stuff around welfare and women’s health from the point of view of the young people that I worked with. When I would go home with them, I did a lot of counseling with them and it would take me into their homes and then there’s their mother’s stories and those stories led me to, you know, question people at the agencies that I worked with about, you know, What are we doing for women, you know, on welfare? And this woman,
I would tell a woman’s story. Actually, it wasn’t so much, What are you doing for women, but What can we do for this one woman? And from that, led me to, oh, my God, it’s not just this one woman, it’s, you know.

So here I’m teaching French, basically, but during the summers, the summers opened up my political world and in particular, the lives of black people, Latino people, because I worked in East Harlem also. And so notion of the civil rights movement, which, in a sense, I had felt had passed me by, because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, literally, in talking ’57, ’58. I’m in Minnesota, I can remember in ’59, or ’60 or so, I’m writing mother and father and saying, “OK. That’s it. I have to leave St. Catherine’s and I need to go to a college in the South, so that I can be a part of the civil rights movement.” Of course they write back and say, “I don’t think so. You have a full scholarship. You’re staying right where you are.”

So anyhow, here I am in New York and I’m doing this and I — that was a real, it wasn’t like an awakening, because my consciousness was awake. It was the being able to begin into the movement that really, not the movement, the political — not the civil rights movement, but just human movement of working with the issues of class and the issues of race and the issue of gender oppression, and the issues of youth and education and quality of education and the lack thereof. And, oh, employment and those things were just –

That’s where — and then, I married, and moved to Chelsea, and then, when my husband and I separated and divorced, I moved to the Upper West Side. And it’s during those times that I am working alternately summers and then I actually become a part of the Human Resources Administration and work for the Manpower and Career Development thing, where I was the Deputy Director of Youth, of the Education Department in the Human Resources of New York for a two-year period. And that I went towards that position out of the experiences of working in Harlem, East Harlem, a little bit in the Bronx.

So those were the beginnings of a political engagement that came from a consciousness that had already been set in motion back in Florida and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, but also —

I talked about my father, that moment in a restaurant where he tells me, you know, Where you are is where you belong in the world. And the traveling with him and the living in a context where we had to really deal with racial oppression, or racism, and, in some ways that were hugely significant to us, though, again, in a context of some privilege, and all of that — and I put all of that together because there was a sense of, you stand against injustice coupled with a sense of great entitlement on my part. An entitlement, not from a point of view of I’m entitled to anything more than somebody else, but it was real — it came from my father and I’ve been — in this moment I continue to be working on this, I see it now as part of a spiritual journey of a human being, to stay grounded and rooted in a certainty of one’s own preciousness and
And that’s what so informed and drove my movement more and more to political action. Because I began to recognize how clearly systems of negation of people based on gender, based on race, and then when I embraced my lesbianism, and based on class, and when I embraced my lesbianism at the age of 30, I found myself having landed in the same territory, it’s like, whoa, and based on sexual orientation. Not that, you know, somebody said, Well, God, didn’t you know that? Well I didn’t. I didn’t have a sense of lesbian-gay in that, in any political way when I was in my heterosexual mode, as being very much a part of that continuum of human oppression and what people are capable of. So, it was like, and this, too? And it all just — it really came together. It’s all of a piece.

There’s ways in which, you know, human beings’ preciousness and uniqueness is not only just negated, but then all kinds of blocks to access, to the basics that one needs in order to just be able to find your humanity and your uniqueness. So, blocks to quality education and to employment and to, you know, access to civil life, to the civic life, and representation of yourself —

Sometimes when I hear myself talking, it feels like I am, that, you know, ohh, you’re talking abstractions here. But it was — the flesh and blood of those young people. It’s so funny that it’s summer: summer always brings to mind those young people in Harlem who were so much a part of my instruction in the ways of being politically engaged in the world. Not that they were politically engaged. It was the nature of their lives that kept opening and opening my eyes. I’m talking the, you know, the 14- and 15- and 16-year-olds that I was counseling through a neighborhood youth corps program that I was, you know, traveling with to various venues, because we were counseling them, they were being counselors in camp situations or, you know, Harlem’s Children’s Carnival, you know, situations of artistic and creative summer programs. They were counseling younger people. And so we would travel with them, with their young charges, different places in the summer.

And then, the young people that I would see once I was part of the education department and effort in the Human Resources Administration, that I would see who had then been left behind by the system as, you were uneducatable, you are totally destined for prison and drugs and so forth, and seeing them sitting in a GED program or a Store Front Academy, and totally defying those obstacles and those negative assessments of themselves. They’re the life and blood kinds of — they’re just the reality that informed my politics.

ANDERSON: What was your awareness of the gender oppression at this time?
POWELL: Growing in the sense of first of all just dealing with the women that I was dealing with. It was always — I’m hesitating here because it was always a pull, and a little bit confusing. When you’re dealing with black and Latino women and you know, in that moment, that they’re suffering oppression because they’re women but you’re always trying to think of, having to think of, the men as far as what is the nature of the oppression that they were suffering.

So, it kept me, like, a little bit not fully coming into my analysis of the gender oppression because I was always trying to balance, you know, this is oppression, this is oppression, the women have got it differently. But as the women’s movement was sort of, you know, around the periphery of my consciousness, I’m hearing about it, I’m reading a little bit, I’m whatever, and going then more and more into analysis, you know, getting angrier and angrier and just seeing more of what was to me just, OK, a part of the oppression of race, just where we were beginning to tease it out and seeing just the distinct oppression that was totally, you know, based on gender.

So, it’s increasingly a part of my awareness and I begin to feel the — how can I say — the liberation of myself. It was like it was in the air and even though I wasn’t formally hooked into any feminist organization or entity or activity at this time, so I’m going into the 70s now, I felt so empowered by the fact that this was in the air and this was — I mean, this was a possibility, not just for women in the abstract but for myself. And I knew I began to live my life like that.

I mean, actually, I went through being a teacher at Cathedral High School and Department, Chair of the French Department, et cetera, engaging my students in anti-Vietnam activities, and even in that context, I was beginning to have some sense of gender oppression [other] than just the struggle in the antiwar movement of the guys running everything, you know. And my students questioning this and I was teaching at an all-girls high school, and my students questioning this, when we would go on marches and all this kind of thing. So, yeah, it was coming in, and in many different kinds of ways.

ANDERSON: And before we move into the 70s and we talk about that, let’s talk about your marriage a little bit, because you’re also married to a man during this time. So talk about what was your marriage was like and speak, specifically, to the gender arrangements within that marriage.

POWELL: Interestingly enough, it was a very short-lived marriage, and a very not bound by the gender roles as much, given the nature of who we were. I already had my master’s. I was teaching. Bill was working in a bank, Chemical Bank, at the time.

ANDERSON: Is this when you become Betty Powell and not Betty Kelly?
POWELL: Yes, exactly. Bill Powell. And he wanted to go on with his graduate studies, da-da-da-da, back and forth. And as it turned out, you know, we decided that it was literally one of those arrangements where you go back to school, I’m working, and you know, I basically took care of the expenses. Not totally because he also worked part-time when he went back to school, but for a while part-time and then at some points, full time because we were trying to get, you know, to get it more quickly. And so, this is interesting and as I reflected back on it, I just — I was instinctively a feminist, long before I named it and called it because it was very clear to me in the marriage that there was no way that I could play the role of I am less than. And then, that particulars that I just described, the circumstances were such that, of course, I’m not.

And Bill Powell himself, as it turns out, and of course I describe this in *Word is Out*, I think, as it turns out, was a gay man and I didn’t even know — I didn’t know that. He knew that. He was in this marriage out of, you know, came from a Catholic tradition, too, and had been in a minor seminary, and came to this from that classic position of, If I get married, this will go away, and so forth. And it didn’t. And we had the kind of relationship where — I mean, we really did love each other.

And so, he went to great pains to figure out how to tell me when it was finally too much, you know, for him, and we were clearly having real tensions in the marriage and so forth. And it was quite — again, if we just, you know, did a video of just that piece of my life and story, it was again a very tender moment when he comes with one of our dearest friends who was a psychologist, to have Jim be there to support me and answer any questions or this or that. And of course, I totally fell apart when he told me. And his wish was that we figure out some way to stay together with this — again, he’s coming from that place of, you know, this can work out and I’ll go to therapy and I’ll be, you know, I’ll be changed and better and all that sort of thing.

So it was a very, you know, difficult six or eight months that we really tried this with him wanting it to work, and I’ll never forget moments of just this intense silence had fallen over the relationship at dinner table and we’re hearing nothing but the clinking of the silverware on china and out of this silence, he just sort of wails this plea, he says, “Well, Leonard Bernstein does it.” And I go, “What? Are you insane? You’re not Leonard Bernstein. I am not going to be your wife and you’re gay.” Oh, so there are many incredible stories I could tell you about the manifestation of the love and the reality at the same time, of the fact that this is who he was and he finally had to come to it. And it was — I did not — and I cannot say that, Oh, and I knew that I was gay, because I didn’t. I just went on after that, and then after we separated, I was kind of the gay divorcee. And for me, very personally, I was still coming out of that Catholic ethos and so, I had been a virgin when I got married and then, but once we were married, it was, OK, that’s it. I’m
now, you know, I’m free, and I was also freeing myself from the church because the ecumenical thing to me was not shaping up to be all that I, you know, continually wanted the church to be and I was questioning that, and leaving it. So I continued being heterosexual for another few years. But the feminist movement and the impact of that on me was, unbeknownst to me, in a sense, was opening my heart up to where I could be really free to recognize love for me, you know, however it came.

ANDERSON: Once you did come out, did that change how you thought about your marriage to Bill? Did you think, then, well, this is how we were able to have the arrangement that wasn’t traditional, in terms of gender roles?

POWELL: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, that became so clear, and it was also so clear that this marriage was a part of my journey on the way to — I mean, ultimately, Bill ended up moving to San Francisco and living his life and, you know, was a wonderful sociologist and we became — he actually, you know, for some — well, not for some reason, I mean, because I was in a moment, in a small little historical moment, had somewhat of the, of the reputation of a gay leader or in that, you know, category, so he clearly heard about me because we were all becoming so visible at that time, in the 70s.

So by the time the word is out, the story that I got from him is that he’s setting himself up with a lover to watch *The Word is Out*, as people did in their homes and so forth, and he says to his lover, he says, “I bet Betty Jean is in this,” he said, “because she’s always, like, once she gets onto something, she’ll be on the bandwagon.” And he was surprised and elated and not surprised at the same time when he saw me in the film. And then he connected with me. He was in the San Francisco Gay Male Choir. They would come here annually for a few years, during the course of a few years and do a concert with the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus. He came out to Brooklyn to the home where Ginny and I was and that sort of thing. So, ultimately, it was real.

But in terms of the clarity about how that sort of instinctive empowerment, entitlement, you know, feminism without having its name was a part of who I was and Bill being who he was, we were able to have, yeah, a marriage and a relationship that was not your typical, you know, one-up-one-down power dynamic. And as I went on to live my life after that and be more and more informed by the feminist movement, I found myself falling in love with a woman which, again, I didn’t recognize it until I had to kind of confront myself. Literally confront myself in a mirror. What are you doing? Feeling so excited about going out with a woman.

ANDERSON: So we’re on the cusp, really, of two awakenings and I know you’ve said that they’re very much intertwined. So let’s pick one and start with one
and then it’ll weave into the other: either the coming out and realizing your true sexuality, or the feminist awakening and getting involved politically. So even though these two stories will interweave, let’s pick one and talk about your growing awareness and relate it to yourself.

POWELL: Well, let’s go with the coming out because in essence, the growing consciousness of feminism was there and I began to read and be aware and listen to what was happening in television and seeing what was happening in movies, et cetera. But the actual engaging began by engaging from the place of being lesbian. OK. And that then connected me and with the feminist movement and then my affirmation of myself as a black lesbian feminist, always, every time that I spoke, came together.

So the coming out, so there I am, you know, I’ve been high school teacher, worked with human rights, been engaged in the antiwar movement, peripherally with the black civil rights movement, engaged with the cultural nationalism, if you like, black movement, in a big way, some of the black artists and musicians, the theater, et cetera, and now, teaching at Brooklyn College, and at Brooklyn College, I reconnect with a colleague who taught in the high school, where I taught, Virginia Apuzzo, as she’s also teaching at Brooklyn College. And we eventually, you know, began to have lunch together a little bit as colleagues, and then dinner together, and this is the person in fact — I begin to realize that I’m in love with. And it didn’t absolutely surprise me.

Now, I want to complicate the story a little bit, because I actually had had a relationship with a woman, and I wouldn’t say an affair, it was a relationship and it was a deep relationship with a woman prior to that, never having named it as lesbianism.

ANDERSON: There was no sexual component?

POWELL: Oh, there was a sexual component. There was a major sexual component to it. This is just to confuse people.

ANDERSON: But you didn’t have the language?

POWELL: Didn’t have the language. This is when we were in graduate school, the roommate that I refer that we got the apartment together, et cetera. But I hold that we can be too rigid in saying lesbian or not lesbian. I mean, I’m definitely lesbian now, or have been since I declared myself, always will be. But I see us as, you know, as human beings, as clearly androgynous creatures, and so we have terms called bisexual, or certainly Samira and I were living a very androgynous bisexual existence in that moment. But the part of us that loved each other was absolutely very real, but we were also very clear. Here we are, you know, 21, 22, 23 years old and 24 and we’re clear that we’re going to
get married. That the culture has instructed us to do that and we like boys and so forth, but we love each other. And so we were doing both. We were very much — we belonged to each other. We used to say that, you know, I belong to you, you belong to me.

And so there we are in the Upper East Side and living our lives and teaching and going to graduate school and doing a little social work. We did our own kind of social work thing and that was out of my stuff in Harlem. And she’s, you know, beginning to date her future fiancé and husband. And he, her fiancé, brings Bill Powell in my life. He says, “I know the perfect person for you.” And Bill Powell comes to the door, of Sammy and my apartment with flowers in his hand. But we didn’t have the language for it. And eventually we decided there was something wrong with this because it would get in the way of us really being fully free for our marriages.

So, boom, arranged the marriage, and we did the marriage. But still, when Bill Powell tells me that he’s gay, I’m like, “What? What is that? How could you do that? We’re married! What does that mean?” and it just didn’t — and that’s — in some ways, a very hard thing for people to compute. It’s, like, What? And you didn’t know then that you were lesbian? No. It was, like, I go on, we divorce, and I go on doing my heterosexual life.

So here now, the feminist movement opens that up. I’m now, what, five years later, four years later.

ANDERSON: You’re now aware of the identity lesbian? I mean, other possibilities for your life?

POWELL: Yeah. I’m somewhat aware of the identity lesbian, but I’m aware of the identity gay from Bill. I am not so fully aware of the identity lesbian. No, I’m aware of the identity gay and I’m aware of the identity feminist. Lesbian, not. But then, so here I am in my own life circumstances, engaging with this woman and just finding this the absolute last word. This is the cat’s meow. This is like, Oh my God, Oh my God. And realizing that, hmm, I can always only describe it in the same way I did thirty years ago. There was this line to cross. I got very clear. And then, there was something about the way that Sammy and I were together that did kick up and said, Sammy and I crossed the line but we didn’t name it. It wasn’t a public statement. It wasn’t — whatever.

So, here it was. Oh, no: this is your life. You’re now choosing your life that is going to be other than what you were instructed to be. And so you have to step across this line in a very conscious way, and I did. And I stated this to this woman that I loved. That I loved her and that this is what I want. And of course, there’s, you know. In my little life story, there’s the classic moment which so many people have heard, of you know, Ginny jumping up off the couch and knocking the lamp over and
going, “What? You’re black, you’re a woman, and now you want to be gay? You want to be a lesbian?”

And it was interesting that she put it that way because it is so much exactly what I was saying yes to. Not just yes to being a lesbian. There was no way that I could just say, “I’m going to be a lesbian” and then other, whatever, somehow, that extracted out of the whole of me. The whole of me comes like this: black, a woman, and a lesbian. And so, I said to her, “Yes!” [laughs] And we went on to say yes to our love and to our lives together, which lasted for a ten-year period, you know, a very good and interesting and exciting, challenging marriage relationship.

I’ll give you an example of, as we [were], you know, just becoming just increasingly feminist in the context of having embraced our lesbianism and getting slowly into the lesbian-gay movement, I’m concerned and some of the discussion at home is about my connecting with black feminists, and where are they and how do I?

And Ginny coming home one day and saying, “Honey, honey, I got it. I’ve got such wonderful news for you.” And I go, “What?” “I was just hearing on the radio, there’s this organization, the National Black Feminist Organization, and they meet every” — and she had gotten all the information. Ah, yes, and this was indeed the National Black Feminist Organization that was founded by Eleanor Holmes Norton and Faith Ringgold and a person whom I want to give the name to and I — ah, why is her name is escaping me, but a black lesbian woman who now lives in California and her name’s going to come. [Margaret Sloan] But anyhow, the three of them.

It was just an amazing kind of a story of it, was that they decided that there needed to be a National Black Feminist Organization. Eleanor Holmes Norton, I think at that time, was probably the consumer rights, you know, commissioner here in New York State or something in New York City before she goes to Washington to EEOC, et cetera. Before or after? I can’t remember. So she of course had the caché. Faith Ringgold was still just a fairly well known but struggling artist and the other woman didn’t really have a public front but they were able to call a press conference and announce National Black Feminist Organization when I think it was just the three of them.

But it gave that opening and so, anyhow, so here Ginny comes home and does that. So I do. I join the National Black Feminist Organization and that was a major piece of my growth as a feminist and my ability to act and actualize myself, that part of myself that was the black woman being feminist, and the black woman being a feminist who was lesbian, and had the struggle around the lesbian piece in the context of that feminist organization as we were, all lesbians were, struggling within the context of feminist organizations.
ANDERSON: Do you say you passed in your neighborhood, that you passed as a straight couple, a couple of spinsters that lived together, you weren’t visible as a lesbian couple?

POWELL: Oh, no, not that we weren’t visible as a lesbian couple. No. There were our parents and friends and colleagues at Brooklyn College who initially, when we moved in together, wanted to cast it as, Oh, great, so they finally come to their senses and they’ve moved to Brooklyn because they teach at Brooklyn College, et cetera. So that’s, you know, how they were seeing us. And some of the neighbors, yes. Some of our neighbors, I think, did want to see it that way. But it was hard to hold that, given the kinds of benefits that we had and the parties and the ways in which, you know, people came and went. And then the signs that went up around the house, all kinds of stuff. And then, of course, when Ginny runs for the political office for the State Assembly and, you know, that was a big discussion.

There were times when pushing the discussion about being out, as an out lesbian, was very much a part of the tension, also, because for me, the minute I knew that I was lesbian, I was out in the world. It was, like, I had to be out. That was the only way that I could reconcile this black and woman and lesbian. Hiding that part was not an option.

No, it’s not that there weren’t moments and continued to be moments in our lives. You make some selections, like I do. I yell at the bus driver right now, kind of thing. You just want to say in the world once and for all, Betty Jean is lesbian, you know. Or have this Goodyear blimp following you all the time announcing it. It’s like, Don’t you dare presume that I’m heterosexual, et cetera. And so there are times, you know, you have to choose. But basically, that was that.

So, pushing on that, those tensions in our relationship and saying to Ginny, “You can’t run for office and not be out.” You know, as an out lesbian. This has got to be a part of it. So no, the neighborhood knew, ultimately.

Some of the challenges in our family, which were unspoken, you know, to this day, my mother still wants to think that the lesbian gay stuff, that’s white people. I would say she has had to, this 96-year-old woman, in the last few years, she’s had to really get it, because the world has been showing up more faces, black faces, chocolate-brown faces, who are lesbian, gay, et cetera. She’s had to declare that. So that, and Ginny’s mother had some real concerns. It was race and it was, of course, again, didn’t want to admit that we were lesbian.

ANDERSON: Was your Catholic faith a shared bond between you or had you moved far away from it at this point?
POWELL: We had both moved far away from it but it was still a shared bond in that we had some language and perspectives and whatever in common, though we were, neither of us, practicing, you know, Catholicism at that time. There were some real joys in, sort of, the continual discovery at that time of what it meant to be lesbian. The discovery of lesbian, you know, lesbians period. You know, and lesbian literature and art and music, and all this stuff.

And the discovery of the political was just, you know, eye opening. Beyond eye opening. It just opened up, again, the possibility for me of, here’s where I get to really cast down my lot and struggle and engage in making a contribution to human rights. And I really did see it in that broad sense, because it was about my blackness and about my gender, you know, and my feminism and it was about my sexual orientation, all together.

And it was about the issues that I cared about. Because there were ways in which out of the progressive lesbians that we knew who were themselves lesbian feminists, that an analysis and a concern for class issues and for issues around — I mean, definitely, you know, heterosexual women in terms of violence and abortion. These things were really very important, and race and racism. This is the only place where I have found in the lesbian-gay movement, there is really an analysis and some real work and concern around racism, was within the progressive lesbian feminist wing, or arm, of the LGBT movement.

So all of those things were calling me and I was, as compared to the black civil rights movement where, as I was saying, I was not in the right place, you know, to be fully engaged in that movement, it felt like I was in the right place at the right time, and there was a movement going on here and we both got involved in the Gay Academic Union. And sort of my first stepping out onto the stage of activism was from this place of, you know, that the world can recognize very clearly, Betty Jean, the oratorical aspect of me, the public presentation of self was, like, I can do that. You want me to speak? You want me to, what was it, chair this conference? Oh, we can do that, of course. And so there I am, you know, chairing the Gay Academic Union and it’s year one and year two, and you know, my colleagues at Brooklyn College going, “Oh, Betty, you don’t really want to do that because, you know, you’re going to be up for tenure.” We were up for tenure after five years at that time. And I said, “Oh, yes, I do. And if anything happens because of this, then oh boy, do we have a wonderful suit.”

POWELL: I guess the whole notion of the right place at the right time, as far as the feeling I could engage around multiple facets of addressing — I don’t want to use such a simple — it seems almost a simple term to say addressing human oppression, but that’s what it is. Addressing it as it certainly was affecting my life, but the opportunity to me that really
loomed and where the responsibility fell was that, as it affected the lives of so many who were like me and those who were not. I’m talking the lives of heterosexual women. The passion for the lives of women and the impact of the lives of women came from this moment of accepting my life as a woman who loved women and my love for women and the lives of women in a larger sense, beyond an erotic and emotional romantic sense, was just kicked into high gear.

And then, always the love and the commitment to my race, black people on this planet, but in particular, African Americans, those of African descent here, was kicked into gear and that rippled out to other folks of color as it always had, but it was magnified now. And it was magnified because the possibilities of actually having an impact on that through this movement that was called the gay movement, the gay civil rights movement, because I then was so, to me, I was more embedded in this piece of this pocket of the more radical lesbian feminist articulation of that movement, while always connecting with the gay boys and — we had to.

ANDERSON: So you felt the lesbian feminist piece that you were most connected to as a subgroup of the gay movement, or as more tightly connected to that movement versus the women’s movement. Or really did it live half way between?

POWELL: It was the link to the women’s movement, and so I felt of a piece, I felt a real entitlement, and it connected me to the feminist movement, to the women’s movement. And the National Black Feminist Organization, we're working always from that, that lesbian feminist place, we’re working always with other feminists around so many different issues, around abortion rights, around domestic violence, around, say, at Brooklyn College, immediately, I land there and I’m engaged in helping to establish women’s studies. So, I’m working with my colleagues who are feminists who are not, you know, lesbian, and it’s the feminist piece that’s driving us. We’re engaged with fighting the administration and so forth to establish a women’s center. We deal with class there. We deal with gender, the sexism and the whole piece, just to get the women’s center, and we’re doing it as lesbians who are out, I think. So yes, I certainly saw it was a subset, but in terms of the ways that I was working, I was operating — and, we were working with the gay movement. I then went on to become a member of the board of the National Gay Task Force, where we spent a lot of time pushing that lesbian was an integral part of this movement and you’ve got to put it in, it has to be a part of the face of it, so the National — they said, gay-lesbian, I said, lesbian-gay movement — it was all of a piece and there were ways to begin to really, as I said, struggle against this human oppression but for human rights.
Though we weren’t using the term human rights as such, I always talked about — anytime, and that, of course, is one of the ways that I most expressed my activism, where my activism showed up was me speaking at engagements, at conferences, at rallies. Again, it was a time of making visible lesbian and the face of lesbians who were feminists also. So we were everywhere, until we were on radio and on television, any old television show, anything that you could get on, you know, you did it, et cetera.

So I’m showing up the way and I’m always talking about the fact that — I mean, almost always introducing myself as I can never just stand up here and talk to you about gay rights. That was usually the platform that I was coming in on. Because I see the interconnection of lesbian, the gay civil rights movement, I would say, and women’s liberation and the black civil rights struggle as one.

ANDERSON: And where for you were the pockets of the movement where those things came together the best? What organizations or pockets — was it the Lesbian Feminist Liberation? Was it National Black Feminists? Was it GAU — I mean, where were you most at home?

POWELL: It was definitely not GAU. And I say that in that we actually staged a walkout. The women in GAU, who were by and large, that pocket of radical lesbian feminists — and I’m using the word radical a little too loosely because there was a whole movement of radical lesbian feminists that stands by itself. And so, I’m going to say progressive? Progressive lesbian feminists, all of whom were really radical, like Julia Stanley, folks like that were really radical. And so not in GAU. In GAU, actually, by the time we were doing the conference at, I guess it was Columbia, we planned — Joan Nestle was a part of that. Deb Edel who, both of them together had founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Julia [Penelope] Stanley was a part of that. Meryl Friedman, who was one of the women who headed the Gay Teacher’s Association.

ANDERSON: How many women of color in this walkout?

POWELL: I was it. I was it at GAU for a long time, for a long time. I’m trying to think, because see, I don’t want to falsify or distort history –

ANDERSON: But it felt like you were the only one?

POWELL: Yes, exactly, thank you. Thank you, because at different times, I know there were people who came and went and so forth, but in the New York place, I was it. And so, it was a big thing of me always having to show up in a sense larger than life, if you like, in order to always be keeping that issue, the issue of race, on the table, and not that other people weren’t putting it there, but yeah. Just by virtue of my presence. Oh, so,
yeah, so we did a walkout. So that wasn’t the place. Within that, the women’s grouping there, there was.

So you say, where did I find home? It wasn’t within organizations. It was within organizations like the National Gay Task Force. The National Gay Task Force had a women’s caucus. And the women’s caucus was, you know, people like Charlotte Bunch and, OK, there’s got to be other names, I mean, every woman who was there was part of the women’s caucus, but I’m trying to think of the really radical women. Kay Whitlock, Dorothy Riddle. [And Frances Doughty, Meryl Friedman, Barbara Love, Sidney Abbott]

So the women’s caucus in the National Gay Task Force is where I was most at home. The Gay Task Force, however, was the place where we did the work within that. I was, you know, co-chair of the board for a couple of years. I was definitely an integral part of that women’s caucus and so when we were fighting the Americans Psychiatric Association and their designation of us as sick and mentally ill and so forth. My going to their conferences and sitting on panels and so forth, was a member of the National Gay Task Force, so we’re doing the work out of that. But we were informing the Task Force in terms of its proceedings with our progressive lesbian feminist agenda all the time. All the time.

END TAPE 3
ANDERSON: [How was the] Task Force on issues of race, at the time?

POWELL: Good-good mouth, good service, good articulation.

ANDERSON: How about representation on the Board?

POWELL: Yeah. And, you know, always looking for more people of color to be on the board, and succeeding more or less, but more less. To the point where — I stayed for four years, five years, and then I find myself a part of helping to move forward, even though I wasn’t sure what exactly we were going to end up with, and not that I was a core founding member at all, but finally became very much a part of the core of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, and that was a real push to just articulate, um, that real intersection of our race and our sexuality and our gender, the class and the whole piece, and so, that was a real place of home.

Again, you know, you had people like Gwendolyn Weindling Rogers and Barbara Smith and Gil Gerald and Lidell Jackson [and Pat Parker], and, I mean, we had a conference in St. Louis, Missouri. I’ll never forget it. It was just a peak experience for all of us of being able to look at issues through the lens of our black experiencing of our lesbianism, our gay, our feminism agenda.

So I was working, almost on multiple fronts, because you couldn’t just do — you could, but in terms of having the impact on pending legislation, pushing elected officials or public institutions or individual groups that had, you know, impact on people’s lives. To say, we’re only going to do this from the vantage point of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, didn’t give you as much play, or impact, you know, potentially.

So I worked — and I’m talking myself, I’m not saying, you know, anybody else, and so, you know, I did things through the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, still, you know, was continuing to fight within and through the white-dominated gay civil rights movement, which is now the lesbian and gay civil rights movement, and the feminist, how should I put it, the National Black Feminist Organization as an example of — that was certainly a place where I was also very comfortable at home, because we’d keep challenging them along the lesbian piece. Now, by and large, we found — and I say we because the ones of us who were lesbian or our close allies were working to get everybody, like, really on board with this, enjoyed more success there than in any other organization that had — now, the women themselves were having a horrible time, because, you know, Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: The Weapon of Sexism*. 
It just was totally there, writ large, when women would describe to you how they had to fight their way past their husband or their son, you know, their 15-year-old son who, “Mom, you’re not going to that with all those lesbians, all those dykes,” whatever. So the straight women had to really fight the label that was so powerful to keep women in their places.

And so then, every meeting with our little agenda and we had to be on the agenda and saying our stuff. The push-pull for them. But it was an exciting place to be, to struggle around how do we see that our agendas have to be one and that where they are not one, we can support each other. So that was very exciting.

So when we end up going to, let’s say, ’77 and we’re going to the state conferences. We’re now under the reign of Jimmy Carter and every state having a conference, and we, as lesbians, being delegates to the conference in Albany and getting engaged in the political process. Not just so that we stand for our rights, but because as feminists, as lesbian feminists, that we could really stand for the rights of women in particular, in a context where the right, the political right, the conservative religious right, was also inserting themselves into those conferences and voting on those resolutions around, you know, women’s economic empowerment, women’s, the welfare rights, and moving to economic empowerment out of that and, you know, all the various aspects, the domestic violence pieces and all the policies and legislation that was trying to be pushed.

And so, that was very exciting, going from those state conferences to — and the strategizing that we did to make sure that in every state where we knew lesbians were being delegates to the state conferences, to make sure that people who got on the slate to be delegates to the national conference in Houston. And so there we end up, at the National Conference, Women’s Conference in Houston, which was amazing, and it amazes me today that we’ve only had one, that we’ve only had one.

ANDERSON: You were the delegate from New York State?

POWELL: I was one of the delegates of New York State and, you know, with our little orange armband, which meant lesbians. And, it was the first time I met Barbara Smith, I think. Was that the first time? But anyways, it was the first time we did work together, and our work was, we went around and we pledged that we would get three hundred signatures of black women to sign on to support the lesbian resolution. But in turn, and it wasn’t that — even if they didn’t sign ours, if they had any resolution that they wanted us to sign, you know, regarding their lives, and so we worked, especially in collaboration with women on the welfare rights issues, who said, “Oh, we’ll get some signatures for you.”

So we went around, literally then, working and talking about lesbian rights to black women who — and that was a conference where the
descriptions for some women, it looked like they took off their aprons and, you know, left their kitchens and came to the conference. Or, these were the secretaries in the newsrooms who said, “Oh, we’ve got to have some representation. You go.” And, I mean, there’s a whole other sub-story about women in journalism and the whole area of media who got incredibly empowered at that particular conference. But you had the ordinary woman who just came.

And so we found ourselves, Barbara and I, talking to a lot of these, you know, church women and just black women who were showing up as, some of them didn’t even name themselves as feminists and such, but they were for women’s rights and here we were, talking to them about lesbian rights and they were, like, ugh. And some of them were, like, totally into it. And some of them literally would turn their backs and walk away from us, and we were just (unclear).

But it was also a moment when we engaged as lesbians in the black — there was a black women’s caucus that organized. Maxine Waters that came onto the national scene, I think, in that big way for the first time, she headed that black women’s conference. But there, in terms of the multi-issues, we presented ourselves as lesbians to this black women’s caucus, made them very tense, very uncomfortable. But I mean, this was, again, the place of real struggle and we knew it, so our voices were loud and proud and out there, and I don’t mean necessarily, you know, decibel loud, but very loud and proud.

And in that context, we were presenting to them other issues that they needed to deal with. Domestic violence among them, you know, that that wasn’t just a white women’s issue and it wasn’t that, we don’t talk about, we can’t afford to not talk about the violence because it’s going to make our men look bad. And that we, as lesbians, could say that to them and they could lend an ear.

We could also say, And, by the way — because this was the moment, we have to stand against apartheid in South Africa, you know. And they were, like, again, they were, how shall I say? I have to tell you, there was a combination, I can remember, the looks on — of kind of thrown aback and then moving forward, and I’m supposedly a little afraid but they were really proud of these young black girls standing up there. “What did they say, they were lesbians? Well, all right. But look at that! The daughters are preaching.”

So we were able to really have a platform within that black women’s caucus at the national conference, standing as lesbians. And then we also pushed the welfare rights piece because that was our commitment in terms of our collaboration in that conference. And in the end, to have the votes go for all our issues in such a tremendous way, and the ways in which people stood up for each other in that hall all around the various issues were just incredible.

You know, I’m really sorry, and I’m talking about this as I was packing to bring my stuff. I have a little box that has a lot of
memorabilia from the political times, and one of them is the magazine *Lesbian Tide* and I’m on the front cover from that moment when I go up to speak. For each resolution, there were X number of people to speak [phone]. So each person is speaking, has several, you know, you lined up at the microphones to speak for the resolutions or against, and so I’m lined up to speak for the lesbian resolution.

And when I move to the microphone to speak and I start speaking and the cameras were all kind of up front, there was, you know, Betty Ford and other folks around this stage, et cetera, and all these cameras just swirling and zoom [swooping down] on me. You know, I just remember that moment and thinking, Ooh, God, you’d better make this good. I don’t remember what I said, but it’s there, parts of it anyhow, in the *Lesbian Tide*. But it’s this huge picture, front and forward, and I always liked that picture. There was a real authenticity and earnestness, which I’m was sometimes laughingly teased about by friends and colleagues, of this earnestness. But it was just there.

It was a real moment of standing and speaking for, and in the context of that even a little bit, that they captured, you get me talking about all of us women gathered here together of different religious persuasions and sexual orientations and colors and races and ethnicities. It is not just about the issue of affirming lesbians. It is about affirming all of us, and you cannot affirm all of us, any one of us, you know, without affirming all of us.

ANDERSON: Let’s back up a little bit. Ginny was talking about it — and I bring her up because this is part of the decade that you two were together — was talking about her frustrations with the feminist movement and remembering being in meetings, and she gives one anecdote of Andrea Dworkin being attacked because of her, I think, relationship with her male partner, John. And just feeling like the feminist rhetoric was very narrow and very judgmental and stuff and this had to do with sexuality. But it also had to do with race, because she’s particularly referring to a real judgment around sexuality and some of the political framework of lesbianism within the feminist movement at the time. So can you just speak a little bit about — did you share those kinds of feelings? Do you remember feeling alienated from the women’s movement and feeling more — I mean, you talked about places where you felt more at home, but generally, what were your feelings about feminism at the time and was that a label that you always felt comfortable in using when a lot of black women were choosing other words to identify themselves?

POWELL: Right, right. There are a couple of things, you know, in that question. I always felt comfortable labeling myself as and naming myself as feminist. And it very much had to do with — there was sort of a flow or a line, a continuum of the concept of, a term belongs to me. I get to identify myself. And it sort of flowed from — it’s not exactly the same
thing, but in my processing of my reality and the world, it flowed from the ability of, as African Americans, black people, to take the word “black” in, you know, in the early 60s and the mid-60s, and own it and claim it in such a way that it would never be able to hurt us, to wound us anymore. And it’s the same way, you know, taking the word lesbian, taking the word dyke, but the word feminist, it’s not — and sometimes it’s used to wound, supposedly being used to wound, but for me, it was so important for me to own the fact that I stood for the liberation of women and for all women, and from oppression, and that was the word that I came to use. Well, enough with the language.

But it did not at all prevent me from seeing how, and experiencing how — I wouldn’t call it narrow, it simply was the limitations, I guess one could say, the limitations, of feminists, white feminists, all feminists, actually, to embrace lesbianism. The fear, and you know, I described to you what was happening with women just trying to come to the National Black Feminist Organization meeting, that was real, but some of it was just this interrogated, uninformed, stereotyped, biased fear.

So even if the men, the boys, weren’t saying anything, Betty Friedan was very aware, at that particular conference, it was a time of calling Betty Friedan to task for the kind of purging that she had done of lesbians out of NOW. And she stood up at that particular meeting and did a so-called apology. This is in Houston in 1977.

And so that speaks volumes to how rampant, in a sense, the lesbian-baiting, the fear, the betrayal of lesbians within the feminist movement. And I was fully aware of that and had the effect of it and experiencing it, and in many different ways. But the most important piece for me, in terms of how I experienced that, was staying in there and struggling with that. That was part of, for me, the struggle of being a lesbian feminist. Part of my work was, I had to fight my sisters to have a place, to have a place as a feminist. And then, to have a place as a black woman who was a feminist. And for me, in terms of my life journey, that was my work, and that was where I stayed, and often I was alone as a black woman doing that, calling myself feminist, identifying myself as feminist, and it just — my life history was, my path did not go the way of finding some alternative naming, which was just very important for the history. That alternative — isn’t even alternative, that way of being that was a contradiction other than different from, and a kind of critical reminder, critical statement, to the white feminist movement.

It’s like Franz Fanon — I’m mixing a couple of things here now, that says a lot about the kind of path that is mine and my recognition of how other people do that kind of work in a different way. Franz Fanon talks about the value of the token, of tokenism, and he simply reframes it. He said, One could think of token, not as, I’m here by your grace and da-da-da-da-da and I’m the only one, anything, but that the token person who is the only one can think of yourself as, I am here, not to make you
feel better, or, you know, salve your conscience, but to keep you on notice that the nature of the problem has not yet been resolved. That was a piece of the way that I saw my role, but it’s also a way of folks taking a different path as a way of sending a signal that it has not been resolved, so much so that I cannot even walk the same path with you. Different ways of holding that message and the information out in the culture, that just because we hold so dearly to one way of struggling against human oppression, we’re not speaking to it all.

ANDERSON: Where were you looking at that time for leaders or inspiration? In terms of writing or other cultural forms, in terms of other women in the movement. Were there –

POWELL: Oh, yes. I was looking to Audre. Audre Lorde was just, she was bigger than life and she was right there for me, you know? Because I certainly lived in New York and we orbited each other’s universe and life and we came right into each other and we came to know each other increasingly, and so I could be sitting in the audience and totally in awe of her on the stage or I could be in a room and she’d pull me into her lap and say, “Now, Betty Powell, when are you going to write about your life?” And I’d tell her, “Oh, right.” I could not even think of it, you know, in her presence, and even as I speak, I feel how continually remiss I am in actually putting down some of my life.

So Audre Lorde was really big. And Adrienne Rich was really, you know, really big for me. And going back to some of the old voices, I mean, because we were discovering women’s literature in so many different ways and so, you know, it was Zora Neale Hurston, you know, our voice was really very loud and clear for me, even Sojourner Truth, who became, for me, sort of the arch black feminist, the archetype, that was just a natural. I have a place and I claim it and don’t you dare say it ain’t mine. And so, there was so much women’s writing that was historical and contemporary that was drawing me to them and from whom I drew lots of inspiration and courage.

POWELL: Well, actually the National Black Feminist Organization. But it was, you know, what we don’t hear. We organized out of that organization CR groups, you know, consciousness-raising groups in every borough. And there were three or four in Brooklyn, or at least two or three in Brooklyn, and the women who led those groups and who engaged other women and really raised our — it wasn’t just about raising consciousness, it was just raising your power to be, and so then folks could go out into the community and whether you were dealing with health or education or, you know, any number of fields of political engagement, et cetera, you were able to take some leadership or really participate in a way that was fuller. And so, I don’t know that the story
of the National Black Feminist Organization has been written. It was short-lived and very powerful in the moment that it was, because it seeded a lot of, you know, women’s powers and possibilities, et cetera, and so I just wanted to make sure that that, you know, got in.

The amount of speaking and giving voice to our claim for rights, the right to be and the right to have access to all the things that we needed to be was just — I don’t know, just incredibly powerful and empowering part of my life. I was looking at some of the ways in which I did that through some posters, one that I was showing you, the black feminist speak and there we were at Yale University.

Barbara Smith and Toni Cade Bambara and myself. Spending three days on the campus and I’ll tell you at the intersect of — we not only spoke in the feminist studies classes but then we spoke to the entire black student’s union about black liberation. Barbara and I were both lesbians, Toni Cade not, but talking as feminist women and the rights of women within the context of the black liberation struggle and the rights of lesbians in the context of the black liberation struggle. And so, there we are on a college campus talking about this to white students, black students, women, men, da-da-da-da.

And that just kind of scene was repeated over and over and over again, whether it was in a college or university or whether it was at a program for black ex-offenders who were now in a physician’s assistants program through the New School, and I’m talking to these, they were all men offenders, about the black civil rights movement and how that black struggle helped to bring them to this place and how the struggles of women was connected to that and the struggle of lesbians and gays connected to that.

So wherever I was and doing the speaking, it was — it just felt — I felt like I had the possibility of really making a difference, of having an impact on the human condition. I was very convinced and am now, always will be, that human rights are not a given, that human beings create human rights and that — I’ve said this many times and I just continue to believe it — it just gets deeper and deeper, so everybody has a chance, an opportunity, to contribute to that.

There are people who are leaders and I — while leader was a tag, that was a label that was given to me in a particular moment, it wasn’t as leader that I necessarily saw myself then but certainly do not see myself now, in terms of what the contribution was about. I think I said to you earlier, I consider myself a foot soldier, but — and I’d never used that term until this project, in talking to you about it. It feels more concrete than the way I used to, and still will state it, which feels more metaphorical and, almost whimsical but not, but Martin Luther King used it, and I loved the notion of being a drum major for justice. And that, to me, has a kind of, seems like it has a religious fervor to it, a spiritual fervor to it. And that’s how I feel my role has played out.
And I guess I want to mention a little bit about, before we get to Kitchen Table, the international dimension, because I did then move to an international arena with the lesbian feminist activism, and always carrying the African American black liberation struggle and the struggle of the now increasingly more black people around the world. When the UN’s declaration of the decade of women, starting in 1975 in Mexico — and I didn’t go to Mexico but I went to — I was very much, you know, aware of it and so forth, was doing a lot of stuff here, it was 1975.

But in 1980, which was the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, I did go and went with my colleague and planned this with my colleague Charlotte Bunch. And she and I designed, in collaboration with the Women’s Tribune Center, workshops on feminism. Just on feminism, period. Because it’s 1980 and there was a world of women who have not even come into this. And workshops also on lesbianism and lesbian feminism, of course.

So during the course of the three weeks of this conference gave a workshop, two, almost every day, on feminism and/or lesbian feminism and there were just always lines outside. The rooms were just packed. And what spilled over in terms of always the interconnect: it was not just feminism per se and lesbianism feminism, but then I hooked into a group of African women who had actually come to me through some women from the Caribbean that we’d worked with through the Women’s Tribune Center and they’d heard that, you know, Charlotte and I were — it wasn’t just the fact that we were giving these workshops but that we were conversant and committed to women’s empowerment in so many different ways, and this particular group of African women who were women who were in some way connected to financial institutions, either financial kinds of institutions, banks or credit unions and co-ops, but the co-ops that they were working with were co-ops of women from rural villages and, you know, that sort of thing. They came together from different countries in Africa.

During the course of this conference in the first week and into the second week, they were looking for someone to facilitate dialogue among them as to how they could, you know, well just to facilitate a dialogue amongst them about what was working for them, what was working against them, how did they see themselves? How was it difficult to stand as a woman for other women? They weren’t necessarily calling themselves, you know, feminists in their various countries and how did that link into the financial and economic empowerment of women?

And ultimately, they came to me and said, “Would you facilitate this because we understand that you do this very well.” And so there I am, working with these women from all over Africa around this economic development. And they know that I’m a lesbian and none of them can even begin to identify in that way, but it was that –
ANDERSON: That’s really the beginning of your career as a facilitator. You’re still teaching?

POWELL: Yes. I’m still teaching, I’m still teaching at that point.

ANDERSON: You’re developing all these new skills that will merge all of your talents.

POWELL: And develop — exactly, exactly. Right, right.

ANDERSON: Are you’re finding your work at Brooklyn College meaningful in these ways during this time? Or how is teaching for you?

POWELL: I’m finding it a split. The teaching, I love. I close my door and I work with my students and I’m loving it. I’m loving my office hours and my students, they never stop coming. But now, of course, other students are coming who’ve heard, oh, she’s a lesbian and she’s out, so I’m counseling a lot of students who are, you know, lesbian or they’re feminist or they’re whatever, and my students who are in language and in linguistics and education also. So I’m finding that, however, all the committee work and this and that, that academia is becoming less and less a place where I’m feeling this is really where my talents — because I came in and opened with a bang and was on the faculty council and that sort of thing. And I’m still engaged because I’m engaged in the women’s studies and the women’s center and that sort of thing.

But increasingly, as we’re moving to ’82, ’83, I’m beginning to think that come ’85, when I will have had 15 years in that, combined with the years that I’d already done teaching and had been in HRA and so forth, I would have a retirement of 20 [or] so years, that I would perhaps retire.

And it was always interesting that — you asked the question of how it was fitting with my life as an activist, because always now, since ’72 or 3, I had been engaged as an activist while I’m teaching and what I found by the time I’m getting to the 80s, is that I’m wanting to find the quote that — it wasn’t a quote but it was the way that I frame it, I wanted to find a way to have my life and my life work come together, and my life, in a sense, was the activism. My life continues always and always will be, how do I, a political person, a political life, and by political, I don’t mean an elected office or appointed or anything like that, but an awareness of the human condition and your responsibility and opportunity to have some impact on that. So I wanted to find a way to have those things come together, and so retiring from the college, as you’re absolutely right, I was beginning to — I had already been developing skills and of course, the skill of causing people to grow and learn and teach was, I mean, for me to teach was — that’s embedded in all of that, so, yeah.
So here we are in Copenhagen and I was doing all of these wonderful — I admit there were several other groupings of folks that we were facilitating, coming together, coming together of Israeli and Palestinian women. We were so engaged in trying to get these women to talk to each other. And I just remember going to these kind of small delegations of women and sitting for, what we would realize later, was like 45 minutes, an hour, now an hour and 15 minutes, talking, OK, so I’ll come back tomorrow and we’ll see if we can, you know.

So, a lot of building skills reconciling people, and in particular, women, my passion for women, their individual concerns and issues being addressed and how could I support it, but where we needed to connect also across the most difficult kinds of barriers and chasms. I saw possibilities. And I certainly had only believed that me, being in the position of making the connection between my own selves and always standing for the wholeness of me with all these pieces, and being in the context of the lesbian movement, the progressive lesbian movement that again, had to be challenged around its whiteness and how do we build bridges in the feminist movement and challenging all of that.

So all of that, even where it wasn’t visibly “successful” that I was able to, like, OK, so because I was there, then there were ten more black women or ten more women of color that got integrated in that — it wasn’t as much always about just that as it was about holding up, well, as Franz Fanon said, that the nature of this problem has not been resolved and so we will keep it ever present in our consciousness and your consciousness and whatever. And sometimes, often, actually, different kinds of projects, the point was to actually increase numbers or effectuate a policy and so forth that made a difference in who was present and who had power and who has access to decision-making and all that sort of thing.

So the international piece expanded, more conferences, more international conferences. Another poster that I have there is an ’83 — Charlotte and I went to Lima, Peru, for the — it was then the second feminist conference Encuentro Feminista Latina y del Caribe of Latin America and the Caribbean and there, again, it was no escaping, even in Peru, in Lima, I found myself working with other women to organize a black women’s caucus, you know, an antiracism caucus within the Encuentro where they were expecting 200-300 women, 600 women showed up at this conference. It was again, this time of, you know, what was happening for us in the ’70s, here it was the 80s and it was happening now for women around the world in different places and so, this energy and excitement of possibilities opening up for women coming from everywhere and in the context of that, having to really struggle with race and racism.

I mean, racism hit me smack in the face on the first day in Lima. We go into a bank to change our traveler’s checks, and Charlotte went through like a breeze and they asked for one piece of ID and my
passport wasn’t quite right and I had already by mistake signed the top of the traveler’s check before and so that became a big thing and it was just — so by the time I get to the conference, I’m like, and I’m hearing stories of the women from Brazil, or the black women who live in Peru, I’m going, OK, yeah, I get it. And then, of course, we’re into the second week and here I am with my head together with the Latina Gringas because they are like Puerto Rican women from New York and Connecticut and other places who also come to this conference who are all lesbian. Charlotte and myself, and others and a couple of folks who we had met in Copenhagen from Mexico, Claudia Hinajosa and Virginia Sanchez Vicario, we’re all lesbians putting our heads together going, OK, well you know, we’re going to have to have a lesbian caucus here.

ANDERSON: Again.

POWELL: Again, again! But we know, now, how to do this, and so we organize the lesbian caucus and we’re having a speak-out in what was — because it was in this very rustic kind of country club thing that they were able to get space and spread out and so forth, that we took over this place, so this was supposedly the bar. It was a small little thing and it held maybe about 50-60 people, started out less than that and grew and grew and grew. The crowd started coming outside the door, and before we knew it, we had to transfer it to the room of the plenary and over it, ultimately, over half of the conference ended up in that room and there were women who came and it was the first coming out in Latin America of women publicly around this and then organizing themselves around the lesbian issues.

And the ways in which they had been organizing women in the favelos doing, again, economic development, economic empowerment, working with violence, and all that sort of thing. At that conference, women were able to say that women were trying to come to them with issues around their love for other women and lesbians which they couldn’t even hear and they didn’t even know had language to talk to them about and so then we, as happened with all these conferences, then we were requested, could you have a workshop with us to help us to know how to talk to women about that. Help us to know how to wed the lesbianism and the feminism.

And then it went on terms of the international — we’ll need to bring it to a close. Ultimately, my last work that I’ve been doing internationally has been working with a group called Women Living Under Muslim Laws. It’s been almost five years now since I’ve done that work around this, but you heard earlier, it’s when I just got a call from one of the women that I connected with, so I did work in Turkey and did work in Nigeria with women who are just fiercely committed to being Muslim, or affirming women who are Muslim in their country [and protecting rights of women not Muslim but living in Muslim
countries.] But working from a legal point of view as well as from the political theological point of view. A feminist, to reinterpret the Koran and to rewrite it in ways that makes sense, you know, for women. I mean, [not] rewrite it, but reinterpret.

But in that context, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, I do a diversity workshop that have them looking at race, class, because when they came to me, I said, “Wait a minute. What do you want me to work with you about?” At that time, they were coming to me because, you know, you facilitate around all the oppressions and this diversity stuff, and I go, yeah, what do you want and what are your issues, and they go, well, class and race [laughs] and gender in terms of internalized sexism and so forth, and so I find myself in Turkey working with women who come from Israel, Israeli women and Palestinian women who have to deal with each other, or women in Nigeria who have to deal with the religion. And so the carrying the work in those ways has been a very important part of how the lesbian feminism work evolved to just embracing the spectrum of human difference from my perspective as a black woman who is a feminist who is a lesbian who is a humanist who is a person who fused my right and my responsibility and some capacity to make a contribution.

END TAPE 4
ANDERSON: Let’s spend a few minutes first talking about Salsa Soul Sisters, I think that comes first in the chronology, in the late 70s. So just tell me about your moment with that organization –

POWELL: It was very much at the inception, and that’s it. Salsa Soul, which is now African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change — just a wonderful evolution. But it really grew out of that intense work talking about in the 70s where I’m with, you know, from GAU to NGTF to Lesbian Feminists Liberation — I didn’t mention. It’s not that I was directly connected with that, but I was always a part of that. They are here in New York and they were always calling on me to do this or that or help with this conference or whatever, various and sundry things. But Lesbian Feminists Liberation was a very critical piece.

And I mention that because there were then maybe, like, 10-12 organizations in and around New York at this time. So what time are we talking? You know, I lose track of the exact dates, so it’s mid-70s, ’74, ’75, and we’re making ourselves visible, that folks start coming to us. So Channel 13, PBS, you know, came to the lesbian-gay community and said, “We’d like you to have, like, a three-hour time to be able to just show what you’re doing. You know, who’s who? What’s happening in the gay community?” I say lesbian-gay community in New York City. So all these organizations got together. This guy, Crane Davis, I’ll never forget, came from PBS and interviewed over a period of months, talked to the different organizations and organized this program.

It was a three-hour marathon on PBS with phone-in and phone banks and the whole thing, and we did everything, from the political, you know, presentations and panels and theatrical pieces — I remember Ginny wanting — she’s such a ham in a wonderful way. That not only was she doing her political stuff but she wanted to be a part of a little dramatic piece. So there was some theater stuff that happened. It was an amazing range of looking at the lesbian-gay community as it was configured at the time. The state of that was, as we’ve referenced earlier, lacking in many black folk. I was often the only one or, again, if not the only one, one among, you know, few, but in terms of in the visible movement, it wasn’t that black and Latino lesbian-gay folks weren’t, sort of, meeting and connecting and slowly moving into more political expressions themselves.

But at that moment, among the phone call-ins were a couple of different people who were calling and saying, “Where are black lesbians? Where are they meeting? Where are their organizations?” et cetera, et cetera. And so, I guess after two or three of these calls, the phone-bank people, you know, tapped me and — I always want to say Renee McCoy — it’s not Renee McCoy — oh, historically I want to be able to put her name out. She was a minister in Metropolitan Community Church. So anyhow, the two of us were the two black women who were on and so they called us to the phone to actually
speak with one of the black women and I’m speaking with her and she’s saying, you know, I just wish there was some place we could come together and da-da-da-da. So this woman and I put our heads together and said, “What can we do? Let’s have a meeting some place.” And I’m asking her, “Where can we meet?” And because she was a part of Metropolitan Community Church, housed at 13th Street and 7th Avenue, she said, “Well, I’m sure we can meet at the church.” So we literally wrote out a sign, you know, “Black lesbians will meet at the Metropolitan Community Church on Thursday evening at 7 p.m. Here’s the phone number” — and held it up on Channel 13 and said, this is where we’ll meet.

And that was the genesis of Salsa Soul. There were maybe seven, eight women who came to that first meeting. And in that first meeting, it was put out really very strongly, you know, what do women want? Do you want a political space or social space? I mean, there were many kind of nuances around that, but in essence, those were the two things. And it came down really hard. We just need a social space. We need some place where we can come down from Harlem to not have to go the bars. And I was saying, “That’s really great.”

And we met a second time and I met. The second time, more women came and it was very clear and I said, “I can’t really — not I can’t, but I’m not choosing to put my energies into creating a social space. Can we do political stuff?” and the women were saying, “No, we don’t want to do political stuff.” And there was some feeling that was really very clear and right on point that this gay movement and the political stuff, that’s the white kids, they can do that. We just need to organize our — not organize, but really nurture and cultivate a space for black women to come and be. And so I said, you know, “That’s great.” And I said in that moment, very inarticulately but I was thinking it more clearly of course, as time went on, that there could be nothing more political than black lesbians coming together in a social space. And I remember not wanting to emphasize that a lot as if to say, “Well, you’re being political anyhow.” [laughs] So I didn’t go there.

And I said, “Well, I’m probably not going to be heavily engaged with this.” Again, it was a very hard decision to make, because I felt myself, like, “Jesus Christ, Betty Jean, you’re just so serious. You’ve missed out on the civil rights movement. You go, I’m the only one and now you’re going to, like, not do this?” And I’m thinking, but if you’re not going to really march and demonstrate and go to City Hall and fight for — it’s like, that’s the urgency I was feeling. And there really was, I can go to my grave saying, that was not a judgment about — and if you’re not going to do that, you’re not — I was just very clear that that’s really important work to do. But between teaching and doing — I was then, like, just lined up in a lot of political stuff and was always being called to speak and was traveling to Ohio, to Milwaukee, to wherever, wherever, to organize and speak.

So that was my relationship with Salsa Soul, in sort of this launching and then a blessing, and many people have no idea that I was even a part
of it, because it went on to become just this, you know, incredible force and power and place of strength and whatever for black women and mixed women and biracial women and some Latina women and it was just powerful.

There were a couple of times when I went back to speak. There were a couple of times that I actually went to meetings because of, you know, something that was happening. Audre was going to be there, would you come and speak with me, or do whatever? And the one time that I was actually asked to come and speak because there was someplace that I had done a presentation to women and Salsa Sol wanted to have that particular kind of presentation, saying nobody could do it but you. It was, like, a real affirmation of, I do have something, you know, to contribute and to give to this group.

And it’s so interesting that today, as it has mutated into African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change and is a very different organization in terms of that, as so many of the organizations that emerged then do not have that same energy and power and potential, et cetera, Salsa Soul does a Thursday, I mean, AALUSC, African Ancestral, does a Thursday night program that is always attended because women are always hungry to just come together and so it is a different iteration of the social space but does a lot of political, or at least awareness kinds of things, but is struggling right now, in terms of trying to find its voice, its face, its whatever, and I am doing some of the organizational dynamics work with them, working with their board, working with their leadership and some coaching and stuff.

ANDERSON: It’s a nice full circle.

POWELL: Yes, it is. It is very interesting. So that’s Salsa.

Astraea. The Astraea Foundation then is my feminist iteration but clearly the lesbian, you know, connection. The genesis of Astraea is 1977, early ’77, so again we’re in this time of incredible awareness on the part of women, of everything woman and so forth. The information that’s coming out, that’s emerging, newspaper articles and journals and stuff, about the funding of the resources for women’s efforts and projects and girls’ development and so forth, and this particular little fact emerges. Somebody has done research on the moneys and foundations and where they go in US North America and the concluding data was that one tenth of one percent of all funding that is given out in any given year in US goes to women and girls’ projects.

So armed with that little fact, two good friends, Nancy Dean and Beva Eastman had a dinner at their house in City Island. And there were about twenty women who came, and the evening was to discuss the question, Is there a need for a women’s foundation? And not that there weren’t a few, you know, around, but that was the big question. And so we sat in their living room and, you know, discussed and discussed and discussed. And finally, there were some of us who said, “Absolutely and we want to do this.” Maybe about ten, not even.
And so we met again and — but we were all lesbians. And we said, “Yes, there is a need for a women’s foundation. And we will fund — this foundation should fund women’s projects. We are not going to be a foundation that’s going to have a lot of money” and I don’t know [who] coined the phrase but our vision was, We’re funding women’s efforts that are — not have a leg up but it’s like chin on curbstone [laughs] so we can give them $300 or $500 or $1000 and it would make, you know, it’s be like a $250,000 gift or whatever.

So, I mean, we hadn’t actually gotten to all of that in the first meetings but we got a sense of — we were going to fund women where women were in terms of needing the resources. Whether it’s the National Congress of Neighborhood Women or it was, you know, a lesbian group that’s trying to organize around, you know, violence against women but there were lesbians who were doing this and so forth.

And then we were clear that it had to be — the priority had to be given to women of color, lesbians and women who — working class. That class had to be working class, working poor, or poor women, and women with disabilities. So those were the categories of women that we were particularly looking at, the women who were the most disenfranchised.

And it took us actually almost two years of planning and doing the bylaws. The bylaws weren’t the thing because the bylaws were our way of thinking through our ideology and our philosophy and the possibilities for the moneys. We actually stopped, halted in mid-stream, not mid-stream, actually, it was probably maybe into six months, and looked around, with me pushing this but not me pushing it alone, phoo. As Nancy Dean would say, “We’re talking the multi-multi — because multicultural now is the whole thing there — but we ain’t walking it. Look around the room.” The ten of us, I think, there were two of us, then, who were women of color. All lesbians, but no women of color. And we said, no, we have to stop this and we will not come back until we’re half, we’re fifty-fifty, and that it’s not just going to be, you know, the women of color who have to do it, the black women who have to do it. Each of us has to bring somebody. And so we came back there. It was only a couple of months that it took us and we came back together and we had then, you know, Gwendolyn Rogers and Joyce Hunter and, you know, just really —

It has been, for me, probably the most successful attempt that I was engaged in, in making real the political belief, the political commitment, to racial parity inclusion from the jump. You know, who’s at the table but who has the voice in shaping the very form of the organization and the decision making and the opening of access. So that was a very important piece. And it is successful — I guess I swell with pride to look at Astraean today, 25 years later, 25-plus, you know, going into it, and really continuing to live that reality.

As I talk with Katherine Acey, who is now the executive director, and Katherine will say, “You know, there are times when we don’t look
like this perfect, you know, mix because depending on the times over 25 years, there are moments when it looks, like, Oh, my God, they’re all Hispanic — and people will say Hispanic and not even Latino. Or, you know, they’re all black, even when there are a significant number of white people, because of our perceptions, if you see at least 50 percent, or even 30 or 40 percent of women of color, it looks like, you know, they’ve totally taken over.

And one group or the other, sometimes even women of color have looked and said, like, they’re not really including black women because if they’re all Hispanic or they’re not really including Hispanic women and Latino women because they’re all black. So the visual, the public perception, has always sort of gone by what it sees visually. The philosophy has been to really have that inclusion be meaningful but people come and go and the transition and as you get that movement and that change sometimes, it looks more, but it’s always held to the principle –

ANDERSON: How did you conceive that you all could raise that amount of money to become a foundation? What’s your strategy for being able to really implement this goal?

POWELL: Well, part of it was the fact that Nancy Dean and Beverly Eastman themselves were women of wealth, some, you know, inherited wealth, and Beverly Eastman sat on — now, Beva’s not a part of the Astraea Foundation because Beverly sat on a family fund, the Eastman Fund, which was, you know, a deep frustration for her, trying to convince her father and her brothers and, you know, in various and sundry, male relatives in particular, to fund women’s projects, to fund lesbian projects, to fund, you know, projects, well, in terms of class stuff, they really were pretty good on that, and to fund those intersections. So her support, Beva’s support of Astraea which really was, you know, in that household, the two of them, Nancy really was, you know, the guiding force of Astraea.

Their commitment was important in terms of us having a sense of possibility of raising the moneys. Not only that they, you know, gave huge amounts of their money, although they certainly did, but they had access to certain women. And, in the process of having done a lot of benefits, Ginny and I were very clear that — and, I mean, Ginny was not a part of the organization, but through our lives together, and other women that we knew who held benefits for any number of feminist enterprises and lesbian enterprises and lesbian-gay enterprises, that five dollars from, you know, a woman who was just earning her $20,000 a year and that was big in those days, $30,000 a year, multiplied by many, could do it.

So there was yes, the deep concern and commitment on the part of a couple of women there who then multiplied over a few times, more of women who had some access, you know, to wealth and could connect with other women, but also a grand continuum. Because on the board, it
was critical for us to have working-class women, or women who were from the working-class background, you know, working middle-class background, but everyone, it was a big thing with us.

I mean we took it to the point of the ridiculous, but it was a very important concept, that everyone, and I know that I was the one that threw this in the hopper because it comes from my, you know, AME black church background, the notion of being a steward. That we all could have stewardship over the building of our institutions and just as in black church, you put a dollar in the envelope, you put three dollars in the envelope, and we knew that even then, 70s and 60s, how much black churches raised and the moneys from maids and chauffeurs and whatever. So that was also informing our, in terms of possibility, that spilled over, not just through Betty Powell but through a movement that took, not only from the civil rights movement, our strategies and tactics and the black civil rights movement, but some sense of the black culture’s possibilities, even when people did not know explicitly that they were drawing on some of those possibilities. So that was it.

And when I say, taking it to the ridiculous, when we talk about stewardship over funds, we posited at some point that we wanted to have every single lesbian, certainly in the New York metropolitan area, have the possibility of contributing to Astraea. So you could pledge, you know, like, $25 dollars a year, or you could pledge, I think we went down to $10, and you could send it in by, like, 25 cents if you wanted to. I mean, we were just ridiculous. I don’t know that you’re old enough, but when the March of Dimes card — you know, the things you opened and you put the little dimes in? We really conceived, like, how we should have one of those and give them out to people, where you stick a quarter in or a dime in and you just fill it up and then just mail it in to Astraea.

But the concept — so when you ask that, all of this is coming from that question, how did we conceive. It was already a seed that was there of the notion of, Oh, yes, we can do this, and that seed grew and grew and as we talked it and yet more and more, the possibility of, of course, we can raise this money.

ANDERSON: And you did.

POWELL: Yep, and we did. So Astraea was just critical.

ANDERSON: Did you remain a board member for –

POWELL: Eight years, eight years. And so, we did — everything from the first brochures, the first — even still, they maintain that image of those three, you know, heads and Nancy Johnson, MJ Graphics, was the lesbian who did our first thing and I was the liaison. We each had — it was a working board, clearly. We all had to work very hard to do that. So I was the media liaison and so our new printing of our brochures and our newsletter and designing our logos and all that sort of thing was a part
of something I was directly engaged in and then just the raising of money, the asking, the holding out our hands and our hats and our whatever.

As well as the whole thing of me speaking and so, our programs. One of our, oh, I think I have that poster somewhere, “In Conversations,” oh, it was Audre and Adrienne Rich in dialogue at Hunter College, and that was filled to the rafters, and I moderated that and it was an Astraea benefit kind of thing. So there were many of those where, then, my skills, the orator, and so forth, was at the service of Astraea.

And we reached out and we really, early on, just were having that kind of impact that we wanted in terms of letting women know that this chin on curbstone and that you were the one we wanted.

ANDERSON: So, do you want to talk about Kitchen Table?

POWELL: Yes. Kitchen Table was — I’m just at the end of my teaching into retiring and the transition into my — so, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press was a natural kind of place for me to go. Barbara Smith and I had had a connection in the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, and the importance of the written word as a tool of our liberation, all of us — black, lesbian, gay, feminist and so forth — was really very clear. Seeing that come together in a women’s press publishing company that was founded by black Latina and Latina women. It was Barbara and Audre and Cherrie Moraga and there was one other.

It was just phenomenal to know how important the written word was. And then how important it was that women of color get to have some control over and influence and nurturing over whose written word. And then, what disposition to carry that word, you know, to the world, and so to be the sort of general administrator at a time that was very challenging for it — and the press has always had very challenging times — was an honor for me and a challenge, one which, to tell history straight, I did not rise to in every way. It was a very hard managerial thing to do and there were ways in which I was over my head.

ANDERSON: You’re really getting it off the ground.

POWELL: Yeah, well, I mean, it had gotten off the ground. Liftoff was already there. And then it was, like, ohh, just about, and I think I was able to whooh, kind of get just about there, till, you know, however, it soared a little bit. I know that I made a contribution. I also know that my contribution could’ve been greater if my skills sets had been just more there. I’d never been in publishing in any way, form, or fashion. And certainly not in managing or financial managing. But be that as a way not to excuse too much, but to say, the experience, oh, my.

To be able to take books to a conference and these were Kitchen Table Women of Color books and spread them out, you know, with such pride. And people just gravitate to the Kitchen Table Press. I mean,
usually these are, again, your progressive feminists who really know how important it is that these books are out here and published by Kitchen Table. And to take these books to the Encuentro Feminista Latina y del Caribe. Some in English — did we have any in Spanish at that time? I don’t think we had any in Spanish at that time, but of course, the world being what it is, so many people do speak English as opposed to us, you know, speaking their language. But the appreciation of books by, you know, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga and Joy Harjo and Chrystos.

ANDERSON: What were the dynamics like amongst the collective?

POWELL: Actually, by the time I’m really into it and doing it, most of the collective had fallen away in that people had, you know, Barbara had moved to Albany. Cherrie had gone to California. Audre was here but not involved to that degree. So it was basically running the operation by myself in terms of the collective but certainly — I mean, Barbara was running the operation, Barbara Smith as the really, the last of the collective that was committed to it and stayed committed. So in terms of running it, she was the writer, the publisher, et cetera, and I the administrator, but very much in dialogue, you know, with her, and then the numerous young women who came through including Anni [Cammett], whom you know, who was a designer at that time, graphics designer, and just did so many of the covers and the fliers and the promotional pieces for us and so forth and she was all of, I don’t know, 20 or something at the time. And they all came through the door and Rosie — ah, Rosie will kill me for forgetting her last name. Oh, such a smart young Chicana — woman from California, here for graduate studies, ended up doing her Ph.D. — who was the computer [tech person], so bringing the element of technology, but they — just the numerous women who came in, all young women, to volunteer for packing the books and billing the books, and, oh.

The collective became these women who were just so inspired by the notion of Kitchen Table. And they came from, again, they were computer tech people or they came from the telephone company or they worked with the Department of Health and so forth. Or were graphics designers, like Annie, and What can I do for Kitchen Table Press? And so the coordinating and orchestrating of those young women’s input was the task and the joy and the opportunity and the challenge that I had.

ANDERSON: And you left to take on [both voices] –

POWELL: I left as — the thing is that I was not so much — again, I’m looking for that way for my life and my life work to come together. This is a piece of it. But I knew that this wasn’t absolutely it. I, in the meantime, had submitted a proposal to the Ms. Foundation to work on a project that ultimately ended up becoming the lesbian-gay working group, the funding group, that looked at how much funds, so I guess I really
thought that I was going to end up doing social change foundation work. And so we were looking at how much funding goes to lesbian-gay organizations.

And the person that got that contract with me through Ms. Foundation was a woman Winnie Deloayza, who had her own management consulting firm. And in working together with her, Winnie said, “You know, you really should come and work with me. You’re really great at this kind of thing.” Because we had to go out and work with groups and talk to them and facilitate them giving us the information, and so forth. And I thought, “I don’t think I left Brooklyn College to become a consultant.” A consultant in those days was like a shoe salesman, like, please. [laughs] My friends would laugh me out of, whatever, out of the movement.

But Winnie said, “No. Look, I know this is not exactly what you want, but, you know, I can teach you some skills that I think will be very helpful to you and when you do find what you want, you’ll go for it and you’ll just” — so I ended up hooking in with her and it was clearly, again, a path that I should take because I learned, oh, everything from strategic planning to communications and negotiations, facilitating what was called interagency cooperation, which was a part of cross-cultural stuff that was beginning to happen, and all manner of organizational dynamics stuff.

Ended up moving to just outside of Albany where she lived in Altima, and we did a lot of work with state agencies at the time, the Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Children and Families — so there were some ways in which the knowledge and understanding that I had, not only from my activist’s work and analysis of gender and race and class and sexual orientation, et cetera, but the work that I had begun way back in Harlem with, you know, the youth and the women and — the way it carried on.

It seemed like there was this line, the trajectory that then brought me into these agencies who were working with the problems of — that were created by the oppressions that people were suffering. So the work began to make a lot of sense for me. Yet knowing still that it was not the work. This was ’86.

By ’89, three years into that, it just broke open, with an incident, literally, at the University of Massachusetts where I — you know, hearing the news of the clash between the black students and white students, I said to Winnie, “You know, these folks really need some training”— meaning, because the deans and the various officials in the college and the students didn’t know at all how to handle this and it just turned out so badly and so ugly. And to hear coming out my mouth that they needed training and this was going to be my work [laughs].

Well, I went to the Equity Institute, which is a group that we had funded way back in Astraea and I recalled that they did all of this work with training folks around racism and sexism, anti-Semitism and so forth. So I did the training with them. I became an integral part of that organization which did a lot of diversity work and, now on their board
and worked with them and pretty soon, folks were calling me, the office of DeLoayza Associates and asking for me and both Winnie and I looked at each other and we knew this was the time that I would start my own organization.

So thus was born Betty Powell Associates. That was organizational development work with a focus on anti-oppression diversity. And that has taken me over the last, what 13, 14 years into the field of consulting, coaching, training. You were right to say, that actual skills sets around the facilitating, the training, was beginning in those conferences, in particular the international conferences where I was facilitating dialogue in cross-cultural reconciliations, et cetera. And of course I then began and continue the self-development and my own professional development and things.

So I’ve gone to so many courses and, you know, three-week and four-week, in the woods and learning, you know, all of these skills around human dynamics and human growth and development, as well as very focused on deepening of my knowledge and my understanding of the oppressions that I didn’t — I had knowledge, I’m saying, but I didn’t have to have a lot to get on my soapboxes and do my activism and so forth, but even that was teaching me.

But I have been very consciously and continue to do the deepening and the understanding of the oppressions, in particular racism, classism, and the intersect of that, and that actually is where my work is now. I mean, I have over these years been working in not-for-profit and community groups, and public institutions and hospitals and police departments and universities and colleges and schools and faith-based groups and, you know, you just name it. And increasingly, my focus has been race and anti-racism work and to me, it comes full circle from Miami and where my passion is and where my pain is and where my despair and my hope is. And it’s not that that’s the only work I do but my best work, my most focused work.

I’ve developed, over the last eight years now, with a friend, we developed a Racial Justice Institute. Joan Olson. It really is out of her shop, the Cultural Bridges Shop, that we’ve developed it together. Where we design a three-day, community-based racial justice awareness to action, design and workshops. There’s a Part I and we do a Part II, the same thing, three-day, you know, continuing, deepening awareness, and moving to more intense action. We do these using YWCAs as the host, you know, organizing entity that pulls in people from in and around a community area and it can be a larger area than just that city, you know, from health entities and educational things and the school board and the banks and this and that. So that’s a big, big piece for me and it is really the focus of my work.

ANDERSON: What’s changed in doing this work over the last 15 years, in terms of the clients that call you and the kinds of conflicts or struggles that they’re asking you to help with? Because the conversations about race, of course, have changed a lot in the last 15 years. You got this amazing
window into the kinds of dialogue that’s happening on all sorts of levels in all sorts of communities. So what kind of shift for you has happened in those 15 years?

POWELL: What I see is that in some way, there’s always going to be groups and pockets and communities of folk who are starting at ground zero in a sense of sort of basic awareness, and it sort of amazes you, like, duh? But in this intensely racialized society, you know, new people coming along the time, there’s always a way of doing, you know, racism 101. And so, there’s a call for that, still. I don’t do a lot of it.

So in the Racial Justice Institute, you will find that people are at different levels, so we’re trying to play to the racism 101 and the graduate-level folk who are doing it. So, there’s a call for that within organizations. There are organizations that have already done, they feel the kind of basic 101 awareness, but they are continually having turnover of people, so they need to redo that and redo that and redo that. But there are organizations who are also at a level where they know that we’ve got to more than just, you know, add some and stir and mix. The access has got to be more to not just getting people in, but getting people up in those places of decision making and really have some impact in shaping, a real stakeholder. I would say there are not a lot of organizations that have that, but those are the organizations that I’m focusing on now more, because there is where you can engage people around, This is not about just some training and a one-day, two-day, or even a three-day thing: this is a long-term commitment.

And so, I am into and can see that there are people who will engage — not more quickly, but there’s more potential than not at that level, which is not, you know, very high, of people who can hear me, hear my colleagues who say, “This has got to be a long-term commitment.” Or come already, saying, “We’ve got to do something that’s really long-term and sustained.” And so, now, I’m doing racial justice initiatives, long-term, race-gender initiatives.

If I had the phones ringing off the hook or even once every quarter, I’ve got a good solid two or three calls that are at that level, I could say that we really are into a change, if that’s the pattern. [But] it’s not even enough to say it’s a pattern. It’s where I target my work and keep kind of pushing people up, encouraging them to that in the organizational context.

The hope is there but it’s so contingent in the organization on who’s in power, the leadership. Is the leadership the ones who are really asking for this or is it someone beneath, below them in power in the organization? And power is the word, is the key word — is the power to really institutionalize a commitment to racial justice and racial inclusion? And if you’re not talking to the top folk, you get the frustration there, you know. So the work there has some hope built in it and some, you know, great despair.

But I can never stay in the despair place. I go there and I don’t negate [that]. So part of what I’m doing now is trying to create my own
Racial Justice Institutes that are long-term and in the community and that is not dependent on an organization, the leaders and so forth. So at this very moment, as a matter of fact, when you leave, my next work today is meeting with a colleague and I who had been designing a two-year Brooklyn Community Racial Justice Leadership Institute, and we’re trying to get funding. We will be the ones who are funded to do this. We want a partnership, collaborate with the YWCA here but it’s not, like, it’s in the YWCA. It’s us being funded to do this to get folk [phone]. We’re wanting to get a commitment from people who are in their lived life and their work in the borough of Brooklyn from health and hospitals, from the education institutions, whether it’s the PTA president — we want people who consider themselves leaders. So it’s someone who lives right here on this block and is on welfare and is, you know, really pretty vocal and pretty engaged around justice, and the interconnect is always going to be there in terms of class and race and gender.

And so, it’s race and class in particular that we’re looking at and we want to get people who can commit themselves for two years to engage in, yes, deepening awareness but more than anything, building networks of people who care about race and racial justice and race inclusion, and have some ability or capacity to bring back what it is that they know and they learned their skill sets and facilities and a really fully evolved plan of action to impact their institution in their part of the community and we feel — and there’s going to be so many components to it.

But I’m at this point in my life where I know I’ve made some contribution and it’s like, it’s not enough. It’s just not enough. And I’m just bound and determined to have even more impact and in particular around the issue of race and race inclusion. White-dominant societies have just got to go! And I know in my lifetime I won’t see that end, but I — just to keep absolutely pounding away at the world’s repression, to knock them down. And in the process, not just working against those walls, but just by virtue of engaging other people in some empowered ways of doing that, that we really affirm the dignity of those people who have been so oppressed. My people. And other folks of color who’ve been so oppressed by this so wrong-headed, you know, totally anti-life notion of racial superiority.

So I began with tears, we end with some emotion. But that is me. That is the feeling that I have around this, is that I have not nearly begun. I have begun, but I have not nearly finished. I am not yet finished. I am not yet done.

ANDERSON: In sort of summation, because we only have a few minutes left, what would you say has changed about the political vision that you started with as an activist thirty years ago and where it’s come?

POWELL: Phew.

ANDERSON: Is it much different?
POWELL: It is and it isn’t. There was this very naïve conviction that we can change it, we can change the world, and there was the reality of the nature of how oppressions and discrimination and so forth are organized and the ways in which we’re at the effect of the oppression in different ways, based on where we’re located by class, color, race, et cetera. And just dealing with, say, feminism, that it changes for some people faster than others. It changed for white women. Affirmative action for white women has been very successful. Affirmative action for blacks and other people of color has been successful for those who it’s been successful [for] but the concept of — I mean, most people don’t even link affirmative action with women and the rise of white women through the ranks, not that that’s done and not that women have no obstacles, or whatever —

And I’m saying whatever, in the sense of, my god, it’s so big, some of the stuff that white women face as well as all other women, so not as to say — but that that’s the way in which that change has occurred for some, not only for women in general and white women in particular, that it looks different than it does for black men, women, and children, or brown men, women and children. It looks very different in terms of the progress. Not that there’s been no progress. The progress even that gays have made, lesbian and gay people, I rejoice. I want to rejoice, probably even more than I really fully can bring myself to rejoice about the marriage piece and the fact that, I mean, you look on that mantelpiece. That little baby up there is the product of two of my lesbian friends, you know. Michaela would not be in my life if there had not been this growth and change, that lesbians can adopt, can have their own children.

So my vision of what’s possible by us struggling and standing in witness against the madness is borne out by so much change that has occurred. What has changed is my clear-eyed gaze on how far the prize is for black people in this country. Even with — not even just the same amount of struggle, even more struggle. And the prize remains. So it informs me that I just have to keep fighting. We all have to keep fighting. We have to keep struggling. So it can inform me that, you know, phht, throw up your hands and we’re never going to get it, and I know there are times when I want to say it, we’re never going to have our freedom, we’re never going to really be, you know, liberated from a yoke of real — I mean, holding us down, and we could do a whole other tape of my understandings and my analysis of politically economically and very systemic ways that the wheels, the mechanisms of racial oppression just turning every moment, every moment, and being kept in place, very well kept in place. So that determined, seemingly immovable, implacable American racism is just that. Is just that. Seemingly immovable, implacable, and in real ways, certainly are. But not something that cannot be struggled against and continually with some piece of our eye on the prize [laughs].

We have to keep a lot of the eye on that system and how we can figure out to work it and then there’s a whole other, you know, subject,
a whole discourse that I could do on the work that I see to be done with — and I will go to not just people of color in general as I have at other moments in this filming but to talk, just the work that I see has to be done with black people around internalized racism, which is one of the strong pillars of the two pillars that Barbara Love talks about, that holds up the racist oppression, is the constructed racism and the internalized racism. A hard piece, a hard piece to broach the subject with folks of color or with any group that’s targeted. Internalized sexism, internalized homophobia.

But that’s part of my work in the Racial Justice Institutes and it’s a big part of the work in the three-day ones that I already do and it’s a big part of the work that I see in this Community Racial Justice Leadership Institute that we’re designing. That’s a piece of the battle, the struggle, that I think needs a lot of creativity and a lot of energy and a lot of real smart work around. But the [struggle against] the constructed racism, likewise, needs to continue. And so we go on, as we must.
“Absolutely fierce in the articulation of the connections...”

Carmen Vázquez

May and August 2005
The San Francisco Women’s Building was purchased in 1978 by San Francisco Women’s Centers, a feminist grassroots effort begun in 1973 to sponsor projects organized around women’s issues. Though nearly one hundred women’s centers had been established in the United States by the mid-seventies, the San Francisco Women’s Center was different in its scope—rather than serve solely as a clearinghouse of information for women, SFWC intended to affect broad social change. The organization’s founders had been active in women’s liberation and lesbian feminism and came from groups like San Francisco Women’s Liberation, the National Organization for Women, the Daughters of Bilitis, and Gay Women’s Liberation. Operating the Women’s Center, and then purchasing and managing the Women’s Building, were steep challenges. As a collective, the vision and political priorities for the Building would evolve over time, though the purpose has remained the same—to provide a centralized location for women’s groups to meet, a space for culture and art to be shared, a multi-cultural community center, and a resource and information center. The building, and the progressive, feminist politics that it represented, became a target. In its first year, 1979, the building was the target of arson and a pipe bomb was set off on the front steps. Carmen Vázquez was at the helm then, the building’s first Director. After more bomb threats the next year, Vázquez made a public plea for support of the Women’s Building.

In a style that would become her trademark, Vázquez spoke of her own family history and the intersections across race, class, sexuality, and geography in her call for solidarity. She said, “I’ve experienced much violence in my own life. I’ve lived the greater part of my life in Harlem and in Harlem many people are violent or violated. My father was a violent man. I remember beatings my mother suffered. I remember the axe with which he threatened me, my brothers, my sisters—we could have been a headline in the Daily News. And my father was a violated man. He is a Puerto Rican man who went to World War II in defense of the U.S. and got his body mangled when he drove over a mine.”51 She then makes the case for coalition.

Today we are asking that you join us in addressing the violence that is a deprivation of our right to peaceful assembly in a safe place. We are coming to you because we are frustrated and scared and outraged. The time has come for us to define the ways in which we are going to strategize against the continual violence of our society. It’s time for all of us—all of us who are violated daily, all of us who have insults thrown at us every day, all of us who are potential victims on the trails of California, all of us who are mere women, or dykes or faggots or gay or queer or punk—it’s time for all of us to examine the conditions under which we live. It’s time to

51Carmen Vázquez, “Talk Given at Women’s Center/Women’s Building,” December 14, 1980, Carmen Vázquez Collection, Sophia Smith Collection.
connect the murders of black boys in Atlanta with the murders of women in Marin, with the terror of the Holocaust, with brutality in the Mission, with the hatred in Contra Costa, with the rise of the Klan and the rise to power of the most conservative and reactionary segments of our society. It is time for us to make the connections and be clear about the ways in which we are going to united as a people violated.52

Founded in 1971 to support local women’s projects in the Bay Area, SFWC, and later the Women’s Building that was purchased in 1979, were at the center of feminist organizing in Northern California. Over the past thirty years, the Women’s Building has sponsored over 170 feminist organizations, many of which have grown into established non-profits, such as the Women’s Foundation of California, La Casa de las Madres (San Francisco’s first shelter for battered women), and LYRIC (Lavender Youth and Recreation Center.) During Vázquez’s tenure at the Women’s Building, she played a key role in the formation of two important Women’s Building sponsored organizations to come out of the 1980s—Somos Hermanas, a Central American solidarity network, and Lesbian Agenda for Action (LAFA), an organization dedicated to promoting lesbian visibility through social and political action.

LAFA was incorporated in 1989; the founders included Vázquez, her partner Marcia Gallo, Roma Guy, Barbara Cameron, Jean Harris, Melinda Para, Kris Perry, and Kim Hanadel.53 From its inception, LAFA was not only a progressive, feminist organization but decidedly anti-racist. In the initial Statement of Purpose, the organization insisted on racial parity in leadership positions, recognizing that race, class, sexuality, and ability were all determining factors in one’s “lesbian perspective.” LAFA sought to identify difference and empower diversity; they believed that a progressive movement for social justice could not exist without it. Reflecting the commitment to sexual freedom as well, the group also recognized the “right to choose from a diversity of lesbian sexual expression, activity, and identification, including sadomasochism and ‘roles.’”54 The group’s chief accomplishment was the organization of significant conferences on lesbian politics, health, and racism. These public dialogues became the basis for legislative strategy, including backing lesbian candidates for political office.

In November, 1989, LAFA and Bay Area Lesbians of Color sponsored a groundbreaking conference on racism, “The Dynamics of Color Conference: Building a Stronger Lesbian Community, Combating Racism, Honoring Diversity.” The purpose of the

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52 Ibid.
53 Carmen Vázquez Papers, SSC.
54 Ibid.
conference was to deepen the lesbian community’s understanding of the impact of racism and to develop tools to address racism with the community. Attended by over 600 women, the gathering offered workshops, cultural celebration, and a highlighted the leadership of lesbians of color in the Bay Area.

Somos Hermanas, another project sponsored by the Women’s Building, also reflects the multi-cultural, progressive feminist agenda flourishing in the Bay Area. The solidarity network developed during the early 1980s and sent a delegation of 18 delegates—women of color, white women, gay and straight—to Nicaragua in 1984. Upon their return, delegates organized activities in their respective cities. Vázquez and the others from Northern California organized an International Women’s Day conference on Women in Central America.55

Vázquez’s political coming of age happened in San Francisco during the late 70s and 80s. While she had been involved with the student protest movements at City College—open admissions, Black and Puerto Rican studies—it wasn’t until she found the women’s movement that her leadership skills and sharp, intersectional political critique would be fully developed and put to good use. Vázquez cut her teeth at the Women’s Building, providing leadership for eleven years, first as the Building first director, then as a Board member. She oversaw the growth of the building and its sponsorship of many diverse organizations, and led the organization through several crises including arson and threats of violence. Vázquez’s commitment to a progressive, anti-racist, social justice agenda was honed in the 1980s through her work at the building and with organizations like LAFA and Somos Hermanas.

By the end of the 1980s, Vázquez’s work was moving in the direction of LGBT policy and organizing. She served as Coordinator of Lesbian & Gay Health Services for the San Francisco Department of Public Health from 1988-1994, stewarding the city through the onslaught of the AIDS crisis. During this time, Vázquez also served on the board of directors for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force which gave her a national platform for her leadership skills. Both locally in California and nationally through the Task Force, Vázquez became a consistent voice for racial and economic justice, sexual liberation, and women’s rights.

In 1994, Vázquez was ready to return to the East Coast and to expand her role in LGBT policy initiatives. As Public Policy and Government Relations Director of New York City’s LGBT Community Center, Vázquez developed significant programs including Center

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55 ibid.
Kids, an LGBT families project; Promote the Vote, the city’s largest LGBT voter registration and mobilization effort; and Causes in Common, an organizing project aimed at coalition building between reproductive rights activists and the LGBT community. Causes in Common, in particular, was ground-breaking and taps directly into Vázquez’s gifts. The policy statement put forward by this coalition, and written predominantly by Vázquez, outlines the historical intersections and policy overlap between reproductive freedom put forward by the feminist movement and sexual freedom and autonomy, a cornerstone of LGBT liberation. Coalition partners include national organizations like Planned Parenthood and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, as well as smaller grassroots organizations. Vázquez recalls,

“So it all became clear to me that this sort of thing called the reproductive rights movement—identified in the United States more as an abortion movement and not a reproductive rights movement—had real impact on lesbians and gay men and bisexual and transgender people, just on a practical, economic and health level. The other thing that was always clear to me, way back from 20 years ago, is that the link between sexuality and reproduction is absolutely key, the linchpin of political attack against queer people and I knew that, some feminists knew that, but I assure you this (LGBT) movement did not know that. And so, politically, the link between sexual and gender rights and reproductive rights and LGBT liberation was always clear in my mind, but it wasn’t until 20 years later that I saw a possibility for a sort of practical expression of that political understanding tied to the more practical economic issues of, and health issues of people seeking to become parents that led to the creation of Causes in Common.”

Always one to push the envelope, Vázquez left the Center in 2003 to work for the Empire State Pride Agenda, New York’s marriage equality organization. Dissatisfied with the tone of the marriage equality movement, Vázquez pushed the organization and the movement’s agenda on marriage in the direction of social justice for all families, regardless of type or formation. About this historical moment she says, “We have an opportunity to carve out a different vision, a different world, a different understanding of family, how it gets structured, how people get to protect those families. And we should take every opportunity to scream to the heavens what that difference is and celebrate it and understand it for its unique contribution to the whole of what this society looks like, understand the evolution of where this comes from. We come from terrible, terrible pain and being wounded and hiding in bars and people’s living rooms and not being able to shout our name if not our love. But it’s over. It’s got to be over.”

56 Carmen Vázquez Oral History, Interviewed by Kelly Anderson, Sophia Smith Collection, p.76.
57 Ibid. p. 90.
Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interviews conducted MAY 12, 13 & AUGUST 25, 2005, with:

CARMEN VÁZQUEZ

by: KELLY ANDERSON

Brooklyn, New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Carmen VÁZQUEZ on May 12th, at her home in Brooklyn, doing an interview for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project at the Sophia Smith Collection. So, let’s start by talking about your family background in Puerto Rico.

VÁZQUEZ: My parents are Carmen VÁZQUEZ, I’m Carmen Junior, and my father is Claudiver Jorge VÁZQUEZ, or Jorge Claudiver VÁZQUEZ, something like that. But nobody ever called him that. People called him Gole, and I have no idea why they called him Gole. They actually have sort of — they were second and third cousins, so they were both VÁZQUEZ.

My father is one of, I think, also seven children. He had five brothers and one sister, and he was born in 1920. My mother was born in 1929, and I was born in 1949. And my mom, her father died within days of her birth. He was killed. And her mother, also Carmen, raised her, you know, pretty much alone. Oh — go back. Actually that was my mother’s aunt who raised her and her own daughter together as a single mom in Puerto Rico.

My mother’s mother, Rita Melendez, actually gave my mother up within days of her birth, because she had, I don’t know, four or five other children. She was alone. She couldn’t figure out how she was going to take care of this little girl, so Mom went to Carmen and, you know, from what I know of my mom’s story, the sort of being given up at birth was, you know, just a huge part of her psyche and who she is all her life, and painful. And then she also grew up as the other kid. Her sister had lighter skin, blond hair, went to school, got all the sort of privileges of being the biological daughter and Mom got yanked out of school in seventh grade or something, which is something she still is not happy about, to work with her aunt in this — her aunt had a boutique. She made dresses. And so, Mom grew up with a sort of adopted-child syndrome kind of thing, but also in a more — for Puerto Rico, a more middle-class kind of existence, where, you know, she lived in a fairly nice house. Her aunt/mom had her own business. Her sister went to college, eventually.
And my father, he was — I forget what number son he was, but he wasn’t the oldest. I think he was the third son. His parents were poor. They lived in a rural area in Vega Alta. Mom lived in Bayamon, Puerto Rico, both of them. And you know, they lived on a farm, which is actually the house that I have a first memory of, because after Mom and Dad got together — they never did marry — they had a little house, but eventually, when Dad moved to New York and Mom went to live with my grandparents and me and my sister for, I don’t know, for about six months or a year — anyway, that’s the first house I remember. And it was in the hills of Puerto Rico.

And Dad, he did go to high school. He went, along with a couple of his brothers, they got drafted for World War II, and he actually was married and had two children when he went off to war, in 1943 or something like that, so he must have been 23 or 24 years old when he went to war, left behind a wife and two children. And he was out in the Pacific until the end of the war. And what he did, he was a driver, you know, a convoy truck driver, and when Armistice was called, he actually was driving a truckload of soldiers back to wherever the ship was stowed to take them home, and the truck went over a mine and blew up. And he was the lone survivor. He woke up in a ditch with, you know, body parts around him and his back was a mess and his wrist was a mess, and he was found by the Red Cross and it took six months to sort of sort out where he was from and what was going on. And people in Puerto Rico didn’t know, they thought he was dead. My grandmother tells stories of going on her knees house to house doing novenas for the safe return of her son.

Anyway, it really shattered him. Well, he came back from the war to find that his wife had given up on his return and there was a dance that my mother and her sister went to and they danced and that started a romance that eventually led to a pregnancy. And so, Mom got pregnant with me. I was the firstborn. And you know, my first memories of Puerto Rico are mostly really happy ones. I mean, I loved that house. It was shaded. There was a big avocado tree. There was an old horse that my uncle used to ride around on and he’d take me for rides in the hills, and my mom was there, so I was very happy. And by then, there was a second daughter, my sister Ida, who’s about two and a half years younger than me.

And it’s at that point, after my sister was born, that my father decided to move to the States. This is, I guess, 1952 or something like that. And he came to work for an airplane parts factory. Another brother of his had moved to New York maybe six months or a year before and said, “There’s great job opportunities here.” There weren’t in Puerto Rico, so, they were part of this huge migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the mainland in the ’50s.

And so, he came, and then I guess my mom and I were in Puerto Rico for about a year together, and then came my first heartbreak, because he called for her and so she had to leave me. And I was three and a half, maybe, or something like that. So, Ida stayed with me and
my grandmom and grandpa and then there were two other children staying in that same house, my cousins.

I wrote an essay called “Moonsands” that comes from the notion that because the moon in Puerto Rico is really huge when it’s full, and so you sit on the porch, and I saw a plane sort of flying and I thought he was going to the moon and I knew that my mother had gone to New York on an airplane. And so I thought New York was on the moon, and that my mother had gone to the moon. And no matter — nothing my grandmother said sort of could convince me that that was not the case, that New York was in another place.

ANDERSON: How long were you separated?

VÁZQUEZ: About a year.

ANDERSON: That’s a long time.

VÁZQUEZ: That is a long time, and the one really sad and awful memory I have of that time in Puerto Rico is waking up one night. My grandfather was not a nice man. My grandmother was sort of the traditional wife and mom and really generous and sweet and loving and my grandfather was someone who abused her physically, drank a lot. Part of how he made a living was to act as a loan shark and charge people ridiculous amounts of money, including his own children. But I remember waking up one night and hearing them arguing, and they — you know, you have mosquito nets and so I could see them arguing underneath the mosquito net. I could see shadows and hearing voices, loud voices, and then I saw him hitting — you know, lifting his arm to hit her and hit her several times. And then I guess he raped her. You know, it’s not like I could actually see it, but I could hear. And you know, it just stayed. The image stayed forever.

ANDERSON: It must have been a terrifying night for you.

VÁZQUEZ: It was a terrifying night.

ANDERSON: Did you ever feel afraid in that house? Was he ever mean or abusive to the kids?

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, because I think before that, we just sort of didn’t have much to do with him. We’d avoid him. He was, you know, the gruff guy, whatever. And after that, I was afraid of him. Forever. For the rest of my life. And actually, he — there was an incident later in New York where he actually exposed himself to myself and my cousin Evie and, you know, we were, like, six years old or something like that. I mean, he didn’t do anything, but that’s terrible enough. But it was, you know, I really hated the man.
ANDERSON: So did your parents come back and get the two of you?

VÁZQUEZ: No, they sent for us and my grandma and my Uncle Hernan. We all came on the plane together, so I took my first plane ride, which I thought was going to the moon. I was so, you know, a plane ride for a child of four and a half or five is like, you know, a phenomenal thing.

So, I came. It was a beautiful day. I was, you know, euphoric to see my mom and dad. My dad put me on his shoulders and, you know, we went in a car, which was also a new experience for me. They lived on the Lower East Side, actually 5th Street, between Avenue A and B in a — I don’t think that block is the same anymore, or whatever, because I tried to go back to it once and it was like something else. But it was a walkup. It was actually pretty much like this. It was a brownstone and we lived on the first floor and it was a studio. It was a rather large studio but a studio nonetheless, with a kitchen and a bathroom. And we actually did use the back yard.

Anyway, my first memory of New York is going to the airport, picked up, go in a car, and then drove to Manhattan. And I guess it was somewhere around 14th Street or something, they stopped at a Horn & Hardart’s for ice cream, which I also had never experienced in my life, of having ice cream in Puerto Rico. So they got me the ice cream and they put it on the table, and it was very cold. So it was like steaming a little bit? So I blew on it. They all had a huge laugh, and then I had my first taste of ice cream — really fabulous. I mean, Horn & Hardart’s, what a concept, right, to build the little windows with food in them. It was fascinating. It’s like, How do they do it? They make the food back there? You put money in the thing and then you get it — just really fabulous, this moon country.

And then I lived in that apartment — God, Ida and me. When my mom came to New York, she was pregnant, but there’s a lot of dispute about when she became pregnant with my sister Mindy, and whether or not there was actually enough time for my father to have been the father, or perhaps there was a brother that — whatever. But Mindy was born in New York. So when I came, I came to a new little sister. She was beautiful. She was a little dark thing. My father asked me what she looked like and I said she looked like a piojo — piojo is a flea — because she was dark, little. Anyway, one, two, three, then my sister Nancy was born a year later in August, and then my brother George. So there were five children, Mom and Dad, in this studio apartment. It was tight, let me tell you, it was tight.

ANDERSON: Describe the inside of the studio. How do you arrange sleeping and living?

VÁZQUEZ: Well — boy. Mom and Dad slept on a fold-out couch. Mindy was, well, when she was the baby, she was in a crib. They had — you know those cots that you fold up? — that they had in a corner against the wall and they would open that up and me and Ida slept in the cot. Then, when
Nancy came along, Nancy was in the crib. Mindy was — they took two chairs and made a bed out of it, and Mindy was in the chair and me and Ida were still on the cot. And then when George came along, I have no memory. They must have had two of them in the crib, because really, there must have been another chair that they got or something. It was a fairly large, I would say, you know, the studio was about the size of this whole living room and kitchen, and so it was a fairly large studio. So there was a couch that separated the kitchen from the living room, two big chairs, the kid’s crib.

In a corner was a television, you know, those big console things. Oh, television — that was like, Oh my God, television. And baseball. The very first day that I came to New York, besides the ice cream, was television and baseball. I mean, it was black-and-white, you know, Dodgers, Giants, Yankees. They watched it all. These little teeny men, you know, hitting balls and running around. I can’t tell you how many times I tried to go behind that television to take it apart and find the little men. But I was completely and totally enthralled, and to this day am a rabid baseball fan.

So the television was there. They did have, you know, a record player that was on top of the television. It was the kind that you actually had to put the needle on the thing and all that old junk. And during that year, I think that first — this was the second summer that I lived in New York, when I was actually learning English by hearing it and watching television, and then my dad started teaching me how to read the Daily News. The Daily News was my first newspaper. So I started to learn English and then the second summer that I lived in New York, on that block, my dad, you know, would have me go get him the newspaper and cigarettes and so, I’d come out and it was just down the block and around the corner was a little place where you’d get the cigarettes and also a place where you could get ice cream. And every once in a while, I would get, keep the change and buy an ice cream.

We moved, I guess, in 1957 or ’58. My mom — by then, my dad was completely not working. We were on welfare. My mom was doing sort of sewing work on the side to fill income, but we were, you know, pretty poor. And my mom applied for an apartment in these brand-new projects called the General Grant Projects on 125th Street and Amsterdam [Avenue] in Manhattan — General Grant because General Grant’s tomb is right there. And we got this apartment. It was three bedrooms, a hallway, you know, living room and kitchen and different rooms. It was heaven. You know, we were uptown.

**ANDERSON:** It must have been hard to leave the neighborhood, though.

**VÁZQUEZ:** The Lower East Side, yeah, it was, because — it was very hard, because, you know, this was my first home. I was totally used to it. I went to first and second grade there, and Judy, and I knew it. And there’s also a huge race thing that happened, because on the Lower East Side then, there’s lots of Italians, some German immigrants, and then
we were, you know, the colored ones. We were light skinned. But we didn’t — you know, race was not, like I didn’t understand race.

Everybody was sort of alike, right?

And what I understood — I understood that people were prejudiced against Puerto Ricans. I mean, I got into huge fights with kids in school because I wouldn’t salute the flag because it wasn’t my flag and, you know, then I was anti-American, and so, fights and all that kind of stuff. But the people that I knew for the most part and shared time with were like me.

And then we moved to 125th Street, and hello. This is black Harlem. So then, third grade, was about black kids. Not all, but a lot of black, Latino and Irish kids were the mix in school at that time, and I was completely, sort of, What is this? And kids — I mean, the stuff that kids do is really kind of amazing, the chance to sort of, “A fight, a fight, a nigger and a white” — that whole kind of thing, “Act your age, not your color.” What was I, eight years old? That was sort of my introduction to racism. And it also, though, meant that from about the age of eight till 21, most of my grammar school life, my high school life, and all of my college life, I grew up with black kids. And so, my sort of cultural life became Puerto Rican and black, sort of — the language, the food, the music, all of that. I really feel deeply enriched by it. But also I remember it as the time when I got introduced to racism as a living reality and not something that I understood or had a concept for, but that I saw and felt and experienced.

And we moved up to this beautiful new place on 125th Street, and third grade I did in PS 125, where I had many fights. It seems a blur of fights. I don’t know why I got into fights. I got into fights because I talked back. And my mother, of course, was mortified. And you know, I was always a tomboy. I mean, I would fight with the boys, actually. That’s mostly who I fought with, although sometimes there’d be girls involved. But so, for my mom, it was like, I got to get this child out of here. She’s going to get herself killed.

And also, recalling some of Mom’s more middle-class kind of background, she wanted a better education for us, and that meant Catholic school. So, she went, God bless her heart, to St. Joseph’s school and talked to the principal and said, “I want to enroll my children.” And the principal said, “Well, this is X, Y, Z tuition.” And my mother said, “I don’t have the money, but I want my children to get a good education and be good Catholics.” So they gave us scholarships, I guess.

In grammar school, God, it was fun. It was hard at first. It was — because I was ahead and they wanted to put me back in third grade, because I was Puerto Rican, you know, because I didn’t — probably my verbal stuff at that point was not as sharp as my writing and reading abilities. But once again, Mother protested and they tested me, and they said, Well, no, actually, she belongs in fourth grade.

So, starting fourth grade with Sister Thomas — Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. They were an order — are, maybe, I don’t know,
still — of nuns whose mission began with teaching and proselytizing to Native Americans. And I guess when they moved, when they set up an order in an urban center, they decided that that would be Puerto Rican and African American children. They were great. They were interesting.

Sister Thomas was mostly fun, kind of stern, older — [used a] ruler [on us], you know, *whap*. But I enjoyed it. I loved school. Because I loved reading and learning and arguing and all that kind of stuff. And then I went to fifth grade with Sister Constance. Sister Constance was my first memory of a serious kind of crush where I sort of realized that it was a crush. She was a young nun who sang like an angel. I mean, she did the choir. She was just — phew. And she was so sweet. I mean, she just loved me. I was just totally a teacher’s pet. I would stay after and help her clean up and she’d take me to the convent and feed me. I was just in love. I was completely in love with Sister Constance.

ANDERSON: I’d like you to reflect on your parents and sort of how they were as parents. What were the messages that you received about being female at that time? You had said you were a tomboy.

VÁZQUEZ: Always. Actually, it’s an interesting question. They, in some ways, were very traditional and in some ways very nontraditional, particularly with me. As I said, I was always a tomboy, meaning that, you know, my version of play was get up on the back of the chair and ride the horse, or run around after my siblings. My father bought me a gun — you know, the cowboy thing? It was like my first present from my father. They both knew that I was not enamored of the girl things. And this has just always been true.

So people knew at a very early age, the child is not — she doesn’t do things like other girls. And you know, they kept struggling. So my mother kept struggling to put me in little dresses. I mean, there’s pictures of me in this little flowered dress and my hair — I wanted to have curls, and so she permed my hair. But, you know, for the most part, I was in shorts and pants and playing cowboys and Indians and riding horses.

And so, my father, either because he was a softie or because he really wanted a boy, I don’t know — there were four girls first, so, he indulged my every sort of boy desire. He took me to ball games. He, you know, did the gun-and-holster things. And, you know, it was never, like, he was upset about it, it just was the way I was. Whereas my mother kept trying to make me be more of a girl. But neither of them actually ever sort of talked, or made statements about it. It was just the way I was.

But they both had very, very strong messages for me at a very early age that I was to go to college. From the moment I stepped into school, I knew that I was going to college and that I was going to finish it, and that I was going to be the first child in this generation to go to college. And they also were very clear that I was going to be a doctor. And so, there were always, at a very early age, messages about succeeding in
school, and high expectations. I mean, there were very high expectations. And if I did not perform well in school, that’s when I got into trouble from them.

Dad was kind of schizophrenic. Dad was — he indulged my every fantasy around boy things, but he also was the disciplinarian and he was one of those fathers that used a belt. And it would be stupid shit, like I don’t know, I’d go to bed with a wad of gum in my mouth, Bazooka gum in my mouth, which was, of course, bad for me, but children do things like this. And he would find it, or he would find — and there goes the belt. He had some pretty harsh kinds of other forms of punishment, like kneel in the bathroom, [on] the tile, put your arms out, until he said to drop them. Yeah. So he was like that. He’d be the person that I played with, but also the person that I was afraid of.

ANDERSON: Were you more rebellious? Did you get more punishment than other kids, or was it pretty even?

VÁZQUEZ: No, I was more rebellious. And because I was to set the example that also meant that I had to be put in line more. I had more responsibility. I had responsibility, actually, from a very early age, of taking care of my siblings, because you know, I’m the oldest. There were seven of us, so I can’t tell you how many diapers I changed in my life. I, in many ways, helped raise my sisters and brothers, and school was a joy for me because I loved going to school, but it was always very clear to me that it was a responsibility and that I had to do well. And both of them — they’re both incredibly affectionate. So, there was the discipline and some of the cruel kind of stuff but they also were not stingy with hugs and kisses and an incredible amount of affection for all of us.

And the other thing that — and they were very proud of me. One of the things that I’m very clear about is that my confidence, and I have a great deal of self-confidence, comes from them. I mean, they raised me to expect success and to expect to be able to express myself and talk back and all of those kind of things.

And so I would say it was a mixed bag, and as I got older, the issues around my butch self, my tomboy self, became more accentuated and Mom became more worried about what that meant. And Dad, he left my mom, he and my mom broke up when I was about 12, so he was not — he actually stopped being a significant figure in my adolescent life, except as the person I would sort of run away to sometimes, and he kind of — what’s the word? — he continued, until I stopped having a relationship with him, to be more indulgent than my mother. And my mom, at some point, I think, sort of gave up trying to get me into dresses and stuff, except that I had to wear uniforms for school, which was mortifying. But she kind of gave up on that and sort of was content to continue to encourage me to do well in school and that kind of stuff.

And in the beginning of my adolescent life, all hell broke loose. Mom and Dad divorced, and even though I had, you know, this really strong love-hate relationship with him, he was my dad and I loved him...
and I hated this other man that my mom hooked up with, a man named Oscar, my stepfather, because he made my father go away. And you know, in retrospect, I sort of understand completely what was going on. My dad was a drunk and abusive and she had seven children and welfare was not enough and she needed someone who could bring stability, more money, um, and someone who was kind to her.

Dad went to live with his mother, who still lived on 110th Street, and I was, for the first year that Oscar moved in, I was just completely out of control. I was smashing things that he would — figurines and things that he’d buy for the house. I was fighting all the time. I was cutting out of school. This was, like, sixth grade, so my mother, in desperation, not knowing what to do with me, took me to see a social worker, psychiatrist, I don’t know what kind of person, and they determined that I needed to be removed from the family, from the home, and put me in a home in Chappaqua, upstate New York. I don’t remember the name of the home, but I spent about four months there, something like that. I was 12, maybe. And it was actually there that I had my sort of first introduction to smoke, marijuana, and a lesbian — actually, a couple of lesbians — a girl who was a couple of years older than me and who taught me about some kinds of sex that I had never understood. Well, they sent me to this place that was like a mix of kids who’d — you know, foster homes and kids who were juveniles and kids who were just like me who were just having trouble at home.

ANDERSON: Was being there traumatic for you?

VÁZQUEZ: It was totally traumatic. I mean, I was gone from home. I was in this world where there were strangers and bad kids and — I mean, I knew that I was doing angry and crazy things at home but I wasn’t doing self-destructive things. So, to be in this environment, it was totally traumatic. So they sent me back home and I, at that point, did sort of calm down some and accept that Oscar was going to be in our lives, although I didn’t like it and made no bones about it.

ANDERSON: Did he treat you guys well?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, this is where it becomes like therapy. He did. He was a good provider. He was never the disciplinarian, because he couldn’t be. But he also systematically ran through the girls.

ANDERSON: Starting with you?

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, starting with me. And I was, I guess at that point, about 15, and my mom was — where was my mom? Oh, where was my mom? My mom had a breakdown. My mom — all this trauma sort of — finally, the stress was too much. She went through a depression. She attempted suicide. And, uh, I found her. I came home. I was younger. I was still in eighth grade. I came home early from school because it was the World
Series. And actually, this is part of my creative rebellion. Me and some of the guys in the class knew that the teacher, Sister Pious, was kind of old and not too with it. So during lunch break, we set the clock ahead an hour. So that instead of leaving the school at three, we were leaving at two, which still gave us time to catch the game. And she dismissed the class early and I ran home, and because I did get home an hour early, my mom lived. Another hour and she might have not made it.

So mom went to the hospital and you know, people — mental health services are still not what they need to be, and they certainly were not then either, and they put her in a hospital, in a schizophrenic ward, which is totally not where she needed to be. She was depressed. She wasn’t schizophrenic. She had good reasons to be depressed. But they put her there and she was there for, I don’t remember, three months, something like that. It was a long time.

Family members, older cousins, and whoever of my mother came to take care of us, and Oscar was taking care of us, and it was during that time that he abused me. And you know, I was 12, going on 13. There was no way that I — and I blamed myself for my mother’s depression — so I wasn’t going to, you know — I honestly have been through all this in therapy, but it’s still hard to talk about.

And the nuns kept trying to reach me. These are the nuns I said, really, just saved my life. They kept trying to get me to stay, but I was in — the other problem was that I was in standard classes instead of whatever, [with] the smart kids, and I was completely bored. And I could go to school one day a week and come back and, you know, pass the test. And so, I wasn’t getting 90s but I was passing. And I would do things like not go to school, but then go to the convent afterwards. And so, I was troubled, I had all these problems, blah, blah, blah, and they listened and they were very nice.

And then there was this one nun — God, I can’t remember her name now, it was probably something like Sister Mary — African American, a big African American woman, with also a beautiful voice — I guess I liked the singers — who, one of these times that I came back to the convent, sat me down and said, “You know what, Carmen? Sob stories are a dime a dozen in this city. There’s lots of children like you with broken homes, sad stories, poor. And you know what? You, at least, are smart. You, at least, can go to college. But you’re not going to go there unless you settle down.” And she made me a deal. She said, “Come to school every day, you know, hand in a 90+ final exam thing.” And she guaranteed me that I would be placed in the fast track for my junior year. This was in early April. School ends the first week of June. I did it. I had like a 96 average on my finals. And she was true to her word. I got placed in whatever the fast track was at Cathedral High School for my junior and senior year. And so then I was challenged. I could come back. I loved those nuns. They were so, so good.

And then, in my junior year, I met Angie, my first real sort of love. Before Angie and in between Angie and Eva, there was this woman
Toni, who’s a friend of the family, who was a closeted lesbian, whom I slept with and partied with for probably a year. I was this little butch thing. She was a femme. She would take me to these women’s houses who were, you know, lesbian-femme couples. We’d go to underground places. I was 16 years old, going on 17. And, yeah, I mean, that’s really where I understood that there was — so now, I’m understanding, This is lesbian. I’m butch and I like the femme women.

And they were — Toni was seven years older than me and the women that she was hanging out with were older than her. So I’m talking women in their late twenties, early thirties, who absolutely knew that they were dead meat if they were caught with a minor, and they did it anyway. You know, they just did. They took care of me. They would let me have a beer now and then, but, you know, it’s mostly Coca-Cola. You don’t get the rum in the Coke until you’re older. But they also taught me how to dance, how to dress, how to flirt, and it was fabulous.

And then I went to Cathedral High School, to the main branch downtown, and met Angie, who was the first great love of my life. Fell madly in love — just, you know, as only teenagers can fall in love. We kind of knew it right away. First we were best friends for two or three months and like, you know, see each other first thing, leave school together, hang out at Needham’s, which was Grand Central Station, hot dogs and soda and, you know, hang out at each other’s house, all this stuff.

And then, one of those times, we had a sleepover and stuff happened. And actually, her sister was also in the room with us, so it couldn’t be like all that stuff, but boy, it was on fire, so we knew. And so, then, we started sneaking off places and the kissing and the this and the that but, you know, we couldn’t have sex because where were we going to have sex? I lived with my parents, she lived with her parents. So, it was just, you know, teenage kind of romantic thing.

And so, from then on, I mean, Angie and I were a couple and everybody in my family knew it. Her family continued to be like, I don’t think so, but we continued to see each other. And then, we graduated from high school. Angie went to work for some insurance company or something in Stamford, Connecticut. She was doing secretarial stuff. I was the career girl, so I was going to college in CCNY.

It was my first year of college. The second year of college, I was still living at home. It was — when did I go to college, 1967 through ’73. So, 1969, I was in my second year in college. It was in a war protest. It was wild, mad. We shut down the university. We called it the University of Harlem. It was really like my first sort of organizing experience, and a great thing. It went on for two weeks. I loved it.

And, you know, the interesting part about all that is, this is 1971, ’72. Gay meant nothing to me. I mean, I knew I was a lesbian and I knew that Angie and I were in a lesbian relationship, but there was no gay movement. Stonewall was, you know, a general in the Civil War. I had no understanding of that. I had more of a sense and some attraction to the women’s liberation movement because I was talking to women in
school who were into that, who were, like, burning bras. I wasn’t wearing them, so it was, like — but I knew about the women’s movement. I didn’t know about the gay movement.

ANDERSON: So how did you and Angie end?

VÁZQUEZ: Oh, heartbreak, just fuckin’ heartbreak. We broke up in the final year of — I went to graduate school, which I’ll talk more about tomorrow, this graduate program called the Consortium for Bilingual, Bicultural Counselor Education, where I got a Master’s Degree in Education and then the project hired me as an instructor and then Angie came into the project. In that year, you know, it was a bunch of things. Angie and I started being attracted to other people. I was a teacher, she was a student. We fought a lot, and then towards the end of that particular — the end of her graduate thing, which was actually the end of the program, I decided that I had to leave, and that I actually had to leave the city. New York was just not big enough.

And my sister Mindy had moved to California, to San Francisco, and told me, “Oh, how beautiful it is and you can live here the whole year without worrying about the weather,” and this and that and you can be poor here. And so we broke up because I really, I don’t know, wanted to do other things.

And also because — oh, now it all comes back. We didn’t break up because — I wanted to be out. Fuck. That’s what it was. Oh, God. You know, for all the wild sex that we had, we still — we had two twin beds in our bedroom and Angie was worried about her career. Angie was willing to be out to family but she didn’t want to be out in the program. And when she was — so there was this level of like, I wanted to be out. I wanted to tell the world. I wanted to not, you know – And so, part of what led me in a direction of wanting to be more out was a desire to be a part of community.

ANDERSON: Could you just talk a little bit about City College and what it was like during those years?

VÁZQUEZ: City College, 1967 to 1972, was fabulous. I loved virtually every minute that I spent going to CCNY. Probably the only thing I remember that was like a bad memory, were statistics classes at 8 o’clock in the morning, but I loved it. I mean, it was a combination of an incredibly rich faculty — and, you know, I started out being a psych major because I was going to be a doctor, until I actually took psych courses and went, No fuckin’ way am I sitting around doing this. And I remember reading in some of those courses, you know, of course, my interests was drawn to what people were saying about homosexuality, and this is still when, like, homosexuality was sickness and this and that psychotic, whatever.

ANDERSON: It was still in the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders].
VÁZQUEZ: Yes, it was, and I was, like, I don’t want to do this. And so, I switched majors to English. And I had the privilege of being taught by Adrienne Rich, by Joseph Heller, by the guy that wrote *Clockwork Orange* [Anthony Burgess]. And so, I had an incredibly rich intellectual life. Because I sort of spent the year doing mostly psych stuff, it took me a little bit longer and I had to catch up. So, the last part of my life at Community was almost all American literature, philosophy, and Spanish literature. I was in heaven.

So the intellectual stuff was fabulous, but the political stuff was also. I mean, it was the Vietnam War era, it was, you know, civil rights stuff, it was the coming into being of black and Puerto Rican studies. I mean, the protests I’m talking about in 1969 was about A, retaining open admissions, and B, creating black and Puerto Rican studies departments. The other demand was to have education majors learn Spanish. And we negotiated and negotiated with the principal — didn’t happen. And so we said, You know what? We’re going to shut this fucker down. And we did.

I mean, there was a group of about, I don’t know, 50 students that formed some ad hoc committee for whatever — socialists, all of us, because I didn’t really know communism at the time. And we did. We organized so that during the Easter break, we came back onto the campus and we shut the gates and we shut ourselves in. And for two weeks, we were the University of Harlem. And we — it was actually a big to-do. I mean, you know, the mayor and Mario Pocochino, who was the attorney general or something at the time, finally, you know, broke the strike up forcibly. There was lots of news coverage. But in the end we got our black and Puerto Rican studies department. I don’t know about the Spanish, with the education majors. But we also kept open admissions going for some amount of time, until finally in the ’80s or whatever, it changed.

But it was the beginnings of my understanding that organizing work to create some kind of policy change is something that I loved doing — almost as much as I loved American literature. And actually my life from then on has been this sort of split love of writing, reading, you know, the intellectual life, and the activist life. The activist life sort of assumed dominance but it wasn’t because I didn’t love the other stuff, and still do.

ANDERSON: Did you go into City College with some political motivation?

VÁZQUEZ: I did. And in my family, there was never a lack of talk about politics, you know, presidential politics, Republicans, Democrats, all that. We hated the Republicans and we loved the Democrats. Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy were heroes and everybody, all those other people, were terrible. My mom actually was an *independentista*. Lolita Lebrón was a huge hero, and Albizus Campos were heroes. They were heroes. And I grew up, you know, thinking of them that way. And there was
never any question that what we preferred was Puerto Rican independence and the United States was a colonizer. And so, that was all growing up. You know, those discussions and those politics were in my family.

So that by the time I got to high school, and, you know, the death of Kennedy, Kennedy, King, and Malcolm X were hugely traumatic for me and my generation. And to this day, I say [to] each man telling me that the four are the most prominent men in the country with a huge influence on civil rights in this country all got picked off by some lone whatever, Go fuck yourself. But it just sort of devastated me because when I was in high school, I really had this vision of like being involved in political work. I loved the writing but I loved politics and I saw that — and those four assassinations pretty much ended that for me. No way was I going to be involved in this system. And eventually that changed, but for most of my twenties and thirties, I was completely alienated from the political process. And it had directly to do with disillusionment of having those four men assassinated.

ANDERSON: Were you aware of the women’s movement or of Stonewall up until the mid-'70s?

VÁZQUEZ: I was not aware of Stonewall at all. I had no knowledge that it happened. It had no impact on me. I knew nothing about the Gay Activist Alliance or whoever the other group was. But the women’s movement I had more familiarity with — one, because of media coverage of it, and two, because there were women on campus who identified themselves as women’s liberation activists. But that, too, is fairly removed from me in my daily life. I mean, I certainly did not, while I was in college, identify as a feminist. I had no idea what that was about. I thought it was about being feminine, and so, it didn’t apply to me.

ANDERSON: And would the women’s liberation label, or activism, did that appeal to you?

VÁZQUEZ: The liberation label appealed to me because, you know, the world was in the midst of liberation struggles and I was aware of them, and so the concept was interesting to me. But I had no theoretical understanding, hadn’t read any books. And the women who sort of claimed a women’s liberation label, to my knowledge, were not involved in things. They just said they were for women’s liberation, which I thought was a great thing.

ANDERSON: So how did you acquire those analytical tools or that lens?

VÁZQUEZ: The analytical tool for both lesbian/gay liberation then and women’s liberation really all happened in San Francisco, and over a period of
time. I mean, when I got to San Francisco in 1975, I did have a much clearer consciousness of myself as a lesbian.

And this is a bizarre story, but it’s absolutely true. On the way to San Francisco, I stopped at the airport book store, as many people do, to get a book to read on the plane. And I was going there with my new lover at the time, a young woman who was a friend of my sister Nancy. So all my lovers have been “ees” of some kind: Angie, Cathie, Leslie, Marcie, Carlie. I don’t know what that’s about, but it’s true. And so I was looking for a book to read and I saw this book by Patricia Nell Warren, *The Front Runner*. And I saw that it was about gay something. I said, Well, that’s great. So I bought the book and I read it, pretty much, cover to cover on the plane on the flight out there.

And so, there it is, in the book about this gay scene in San Francisco and la-de-da, and I was, like — because my sister had gone out to San Francisco with a man named Richard Townsend whom she fell madly in love with and he got a scholarship, quote unquote, to study at the University of San Francisco, so she went out there. And I was going to initially stay with her until I found a place of my own. They lived on 17th and Noe, right, so it’s, like, a block away from the Castro Drag. And you know, I asked a few questions about what did they know about this gay thing and they were, like, Oh. They were not forthcoming.

So, the next [day] — that was like a Saturday. We didn’t spend time much in the neighborhood. We went to Muir Woods and he made dinner for us and, or maybe it was a Sunday. And on Monday, she went to work and he went to school, I decided to call and find out where was the gay thing. And so I called the Switchboard, the Lesbian-Gay Switchboard in San Francisco and I asked, Where should I go? And it was a gay man and he said, “Well, honey, what do you want, boys or girls?” And so I said, “Girls.” And so he directed me to the corner of 18th and Castro. I was near Market and so he directed me to 18th and Castro, where — the Blue Moon Café? There was a café, a women’s café, I think it was called the Blue Moon, and I said, “Where’s 18th and Castro?” “Where are you?” And so I told him, and I couldn’t believe it. I was a block, I was literally a block and a half away from this place.

So, I mean, that was my honest-to-God real introduction to the gay world in San Francisco. And you know, the Castro itself was, and still is, overwhelmingly a gay male place. And I wasn’t used to — I mean, almost all of my experience — NY, almost all of my experience was lesbians, lesbians of color. And the gay men that I knew were Latino gay men. So this was, like, Wow, like Mars. But I went to the café and I started trying to figure out where people went to hang out and where the bars were and stuff like that.

And, you know, I still had it in my head that the direction of my life was to be an antiracist activist who worked in the Latino community. And so I found a job with the League of United Latin American Citizens, where I was hired as a director of counselor education. And it was in the LULAC building, which is on 26th and Folsom, and it pretty much functioned as a Latino community center, which is another thing
I’ve had connections to all my life, it seems — community centers of some kind or another. And they were managed by LULAC and I worked for the counseling service, but lots of other things happened in that building.

And about three months into the job, the director quit and I was immediately promoted to acting director, which meant that among other things I was part of this council that managed the building. And one of the things they did was they rented space to other organizations. Well, one of the organizations, and I told this story last night — actually just remembered it also for the first time in many years because of the afternoon session — one of the groups that applied for space in the building was a Latino gay group, I think it was GALA, Gay and Lesbian Alliance, or Gay and Lesbian Latino Alliance, something. I don’t remember the whole name but it was a gay Latino group that applied for space and this was, like eight men and two women or something like that. And these guys are sitting around just ribald with, like, maricón, and jokes and laughing.

And I was just — I was overwhelmed with rage and it wasn’t fear, it was rage. And so I listened to it for a while, and then I finally couldn’t stand it anymore, and I said, “You know, you’re talking in front of a lesbian.” And I basically gave them a huge lecture about, How could you do this? I mean, how could people that understand what it feels like to be called a fucking spic and a wetback and everything else, sit here and behave the way that you’re behaving about another group of Latino people? At which point I started crying and left the room.

That was my first ever public professional instance of coming out, and of challenging people. And of course, I thought, Well, there goes the job. But it didn’t happen. I mean, you know, not all of them were apologetic, but several of them were embarrassed about their behavior, I guess particularly the ones who had begun to be friends. And so it began a process in that agency, of having an open conversation about, What do we do? They eventually rented the space to the group, by the way.

And then, I sort of, over a period of two, three months, really started to lose it, because I — you know, I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. You know, I had a master’s degree. I was not working. I was waitressing in a hotel, and a city one at that. What the fuck am I doing? So I got progressively worse. I mean, I guess it was depression but it was also sort of a disassociated state where I would walk out the door and go down a block and all of a sudden not know where I was. And at that point, I realized, I really need some help.

So I called the Switchboard again — thank God for the Switchboard — and asked for information about where to go for counseling. And they sent me to the mental health clinic in San Francisco, Operation Concern, which Carole Migden was the founder of. It’s been around forever, since at least 1978, ’77, ’78, which is when this was happening. And I went there and I, you know, I was interviewed. Somebody did an
intake interview and they said, “Well, you need some counseling.” And I said, “No kidding.”

And they said they would set up an appointment with me and I honestly don’t remember why I was so insistent but I was, that I wanted to see a lesbian of color, or a third world lesbian. They were not lesbians of color then. They were third world lesbians. And so, they happened to have one. Pat Norman was practicing, not at the clinic but she took referrals from the clinic. She was at the Center for Special Concerns and working for the health department. And I went to see Pat. And you know, Pat’s another one of the people in my life that saved my life, because she took me in and she did some fairly traditional one-on-one counseling with me, I don’t know, for about four months or so. And I was feeling better.

And I, at that point, by that time, had gotten a part-time job and was collecting unemployment benefits, so I had a little bit more money. I found my own studio apartment, which I loved. I so loved that apartment. It is still my favorite place in San Francisco. It was on Bush Street and you could see the Drake Hotel, the little star from the windows. It was just a great place.

And after about four months or so of doing that fairly traditional kind of counseling, Pat started to schedule my appointments like at 5 o’clock or 6 o’clock. And then after the appointments, she took me out. She took me to bars. She took me to meetings of community groups and all the third world things that she could think of, and I found the gay and lesbian community— she took me to it, and within two or three months of that, I was cured. Really.

ANDERSON: You were isolated.

VÁZQUEZ: It turns out I was isolated, and isolation does terrible things to people. And she knew that. And so, I really then quickly began to meet people and to have friends. And Scott’s Bar was a place that I spent a lot of time in and sort of through that process, began to meet a group of women of color: Jay Castleberry, Jacque Dupree, Alli Merrero, Sue Rodriguez, who was a boxer. And these girls, they were serious. They were tough, hard-drinking, hard-working, hard-partying tough girls. Alli — motorcycle. And it was interesting, they all had white girlfriends: white, working class, femme girlfriends, which I didn’t have one at the time, because at that point, Cathie and I had broken up. Cathie had gone back to New York.

And back then, I identified as feminist. I mean, this was the interesting piece. And I finally began to have conversations with people who identified as feminist who looked like me and were like me and came from working-class backgrounds and who had a political ideology and way of thinking about themselves as lesbians and as feminists. And two or three of whom totally also identified as butch. So, you know, I was in heaven. They called themselves the Family and they adopted me and I was just fine.
And, uh, and it as through them that I eventually came to be acquainted with Women’s Centers — because you know, in my journey to find the women’s movement, I kept [saying], like, Well, where is it, you know. And I went to Women’s Centers when it was on Brady Street. It was on a small street, Butler Street in San Francisco, in the Mission, and it was two small rooms with like a big stack of newsletters and information, but the phones were ringing. There was one person in the office, nobody’s really talking to you. And I’m like, What the fuck, you know.

So my involvement with the community, with feminism, and my first sort of activist thing in San Francisco was in 1978. It was, you know, the year of the Briggs Initiative. Harvey Milk had finally gotten elected to office. And, you know, just a huge moment in San Francisco history. And Sally Gearhart was big spokesperson. And I went to a meeting of a political group called Stonewall, and they were among the groups that had stage time, and so they had to pick a speaker. They had this very intense political discussion about who it should be and who it shouldn’t be and they all came to the conclusion that it should be a person of color and then, of course, a lesbian of color.

And they agreed that it should be Alli Marrero, who was a Puerto Rican activist that was involved with the club, except that Alli wasn’t there that day. [I was] sitting there going, How do you decide to elect someone who isn’t here? Who knows if she wants to do this? It’s like, you people, you got to think a little bit about what you’re doing and what kind of na-na-na, another lecture. And they all agreed, and then they decided I should do it. So, then, I was, like, Well, all right. I actually said, No, I’m going to call Alli. And I called Alli and I said da-da-da-da. And Alli and I agreed that that was a great thing. You go do it.

And so I did. And I had no concept. I had never been to a gay pride thing. And so, there I was. I’m in San Francisco and it’s, like, I don’t know, half a million, a million people, and I had all my little notes and I’m back stage and, you know, I’m anxious, I’m nervous. I had done speaking before, and I had actually spoken to a fairly large audiences, but never anything like this. And so I’m waiting, and who precedes me on the program are Harvey Milk, followed by Sally Gearhart. I was, you know, 28 or something at the time. I had never been involved in anything like this.

And then, after that, I sort of — the Women’s Building thing happened and they bought the building in 1979. I continued to work odd jobs. I worked in the food co-op in the Haight. I lived with some lesbian feminists in some bit apartment in the Haight. I remember a little woman who called herself Blue: Jewish, you know, big red cheeks and curly hair, and she loved to cook and she’d say things like, Food is love.

ANDERSON: Was that a big change for you culturally coming from New York to San Francisco? How did you find that in comparison?

VÁZQUEZ: No, no. It was a huge cultural shift, and some of it I was really intrigued by and I thought it was fun. But some of it I completely distrusted. I
mean, I — because, you know, like I said to the woman named Yohembé, you know, I can deal with you as Susie and I sort of know where Susie comes from but I don’t know what this Yohembé business is about, why you have to have an African name that belongs to my people, and yet you people are out there doing drums and stuff like that. That doesn’t come from your place. What are you doing? I’d rather know about wherever you’re from, your Scottish heritage or your whatever heritage, than this. So I mistrusted it.

And it was also largely cultural. There was nobody really talking to me about theory or politics except for my gang, and that didn’t happen until the Women’s Building got bought and it opened and Jay and Jacque got jobs there. And they got jobs in the Women’s Building because San Francisco Women’s Centers was the legal entity that bought the building and they were a collective. They were a lesbian feminist collective of mostly white women.

There were two women of color. Tatiana — gosh, I can’t remember. But two women of color who were involved with the collective and the rest were white, and two of them, Roma Guy and Dionne Jones, I in time came to adore and became really, really solid friends, allies, family, to each other. But I was, like, Well, whatever, and I didn’t have much to do with the building. But Jay and Jacque worked there. Actually, BG also rented a space there and was part of the council that ran the building and they all said, You need to get a job here. I’m, like, OK, if there is one, let me know.

Well, the job that opened up was not in the building. It was in Women’s Centers. I said, “Guys, what do you think about this? I’m not so sure. It’s a lot of white women,” et cetera, et cetera. They said, We think you should take that job and go spy on them. Just go spy on them and tell us what they’re up to, you know, because they’re the landlords. And I thought, Well, that’s OK, that’s a good idea. And I joined Women’s Centers as their — actually started working a little bit with them, teaching them Spanish, because they had moved to the Mission and the collective decided they should learn Spanish. They were good white girls.

They formed a consortium of women that, in 1978, there was the huge conference on Women and Violence in San Francisco. The process of trying to find a space that could hold that conference was so hard and so difficult for people that they had the conference, but they decided out of that experience that it was really time that there be a women’s space in San Francisco, and they set out to create one. So their vision was that Women’s Centers would raise the money to put a down payment on the building and do some basic, immediate kind of renovation work, but that people who moved into the building would form a management council that would also function as a collective and Women’s Centers would be one of those voices, not the voice.

ANDERSON: How did they raise the money? Do you know?
VÁZQUEZ: A lot of individual fundraising. I don’t think they got much foundation — they may have gotten one or two foundation grants but it was mostly donor work. And, you know, Marya Grahms, Roma Guy, Tracy Gary, the three of them were really the founders of the Women’s Building. They led the charge to figure out how to get the money and bring a capital campaign together.

And so they opened, and Women’s Centers — the intent was that the building was to be a sponsored project that would eventually spin off on its own. And Women’s Centers had a history of doing that. There’s virtually no women’s organization in the Bay area that doesn’t trace its history back to a sponsored project of Women’s Centers. That was their primary program and why it was called Women’s, apostrophe S, Centers. That was the name of the organization and they’re the ones that sponsored the Women’s Foundation, the building, and like I said, virtually any women’s organization in the Bay area can trace itself back to Women’s Centers. And so, they wanted to stay in that business.

I mean, they wanted to continue to sponsor women’s projects that would, you know, foster and grow and do their own thing. Except it didn’t work. You know, when you have a physical property that becomes a symbol of the community, and people come there for connection and culture and whatever, space, they get attached to it. And so, in the public’s mind, in our public’s mind, the Women’s Building and the Women’s Centers were synonymous. So, raising money for two distinct organizations became an issue.

And the other thing that became a huge issue was the Women’s Building was predominantly women of color staffed. Women’s Centers was predominantly white. We’re talking major power struggle — major, major, major power struggle. I was hired as the membership coordinator or something like that at Women’s Centers, but as I told you, my lesbian of color feminist friends were in the Women’s Building. So there was this huge sort of tug back and forth about the problems of being the, you know, the Women’s Centers’ white women landlords and here were the peon workers and they didn’t have any real power.

And we, in my first year with the Women’s Building, we almost didn’t make it. We had a fire by arson in like January or something of the first year. We had a bombing. A pipe bomb got thrown into the lobby of the place, went kaboom and some Neo-Nazi group claimed credit for it. Who knows who did it, but that’s who claimed credit for it. And then we had a month-long bomb threat.

And this is another sort of seminal moment in Carmen’s history. We were in the process of trying to figure out what to do about the two collectives. There was movement towards merging the two groups and forming one collective, which meant a new mission and a new set of, you know, whatever, board objectives, and we were in that process while all this violence was also going on. And we decided, all of us — I don’t remember at what point we were in the merger — but we decided that we needed to respond, that rather than just kind of whatever, being quiet about it, that we needed a community event to which we invited
the press, that said very clearly and very unambiguously that we were there to stay. And no amount of scare tactics was going to, you know, push us out of that place.

And so we organized a community meeting, and what we did is we went and invited as many gay and women’s and immigrant and Mission-based organizations, even some of the merchants, to come to this building, the Center, same thing, and show their support for us being there. I don’t remember, 200 people, a lot of people showed up to that meeting, and I gave my first speech — first of many, many, many, many. I said, “Women’s Building is a family,” I think, or “Women’s Building a family place.” And in it, I talked about the many ways in which women are violated — physically, emotionally and economically and sexually, and this is just another violation that we have to stand up to. And John Lennon had been killed, and I referenced John Lennon and his dreams, and I referenced my father, because he also was a man who had experienced an enormous amount of violence in his life and — and I don’t know. The speech — it was published in Coming Up, which later became Frontiers or some other magazine in San Francisco — but it really sort of set a tone for the Women’s Building and a progressive set of politics, and me as a leader in that mix.

And so that was the beginning. And you know, Dionne and Roma Guy, Dionne Jones and Roma Guy from what was Women’s Centers but eventually became just the Women’s Building Collective, became good friends and they really began to introduce me to feminist theory and thinking and politics and it was a critically important part of my political development, both of them. But also there was an organization called Third World Women’s Alliance that was a tenant in the building which eventually became the Alliance Against Women’s Oppression after a long sort of political analysis of what they were doing and an understanding that women of color and white women needed to be allies in every conceivable way, and so that struggle had to be an alliance of all women.

Roma and Dionne had friends and they talked, and that organization sponsored — they were part of the Line of March, which was a communist organization whose primary program and project was to train activists in Marxist-Leninist analysis. And the Third World Women’s Alliance, later the Alliance Against Woman’s Oppression, was sort of their women’s cell. They did similar kind of teaching and training but with a sort of feminist — incorporating feminism into it. And Roma and Dionne knew them and they must have been involved in some early study things that the Alliance did.

But then, it was about 1983 or something like that, Roma and Dionne were actively involved in the MLEP, Marxist-Leninist Education Project. They were taking a course, and the course was a — they had a six-week course that was sort of crash intensive in Marxist-Leninist theory, and organizing. And then, if you passed and were interested, then there was a year course. And the year course was fairly intensive little bit of business where you spent probably six hours in a
class setting on Sundays and then you spent about another four hours in a study-buddy group thing during the week — for a year.

So, this, then, is where my analytical skills [came from], in terms of thinking strategically about, What’s the problem? What are the material conditions that created and sort of fester that problem? What are the forces out there? Who’s for? Who’s against? That kind of thinking. At some level — my experiences in New York and with the Puerto Rican independence people and with the Young Lords and campus activism — I’d experienced and done some of that, but I’d done it more organically as part of the organizing work, not as something that was actually political theory.

And so, I became involved with the Third World Women’s Alliance and took the MLEP course. In my capacity as the — oh, they didn’t have directors in those days, they had coordinators, and I was coordinator of fundraising and administration for the Building, but it meant that I was out a lot and that I was a spokesperson for the Building a lot, and you know, doing a lot of rabble-rousing and speeches, but beginning to put out an analysis of race and class and sexuality and gender that was formed, really, and that was the crucible for — a lot of my thinking and writing and speaking got formed in that place. I mean, I was involved with the Women’s Building for 11 years, from 1980 to 1991, four of them as a staff person, seven of them as a board member. That was a long, long involvement with a core of women. They weren’t all the same women. Some people left and came, but there was a core that remained involved and I really grew tremendously from that involvement.

And we had crazy conflicts. It was a collective, you know, you had to make decisions as a collective, which I never was happy with.

ANDERSON: Why?

VÁZQUEZ: Because there’s an authoritarian streak in me. I’m the oldest daughter. I’m like, You know what? I don’t believe in whatever. But I lived with it and I came to know and value the importance of bringing a group of people who were working together to consensus — or at least with as much unity as they could attain.

And I remember that the times when we tried to break away from that really felt terrible, because — and there were two — one instance in particular was huge. It was an SM group, Samois, Gayle Rubin’s group wanted to meet at the building, and you know, there was an awful lot of people in the community who felt this was anti-feminist, that they shouldn’t be there. And the collective met for I can’t tell you how many hours, and we could not come to consensus on this, because there were some of us in the room, myself included, who felt like, You know what? I don’t know what you’re talking about. This is sex. This is not — this is like what people decide to do in the privacy of whatever. And if people, you know, if people want to have an opportunity in a public place to talk
about it, they should have that opportunity, you know? This is a democracy, for God’s sake. What are you talking about?

Even though I completely and totally related to and understood the feelings that some people — and I shared some of those feelings — of walking into a bar and seeing a black woman with a collar on being led around by a white woman. It’s like, You know what? I don’t think so. This really — I can’t go there. And could I go into — you know, could I engage in sadomasochism, particularly if there’s that sort of a racial difference? I don’t know.

But intellectually and politically, I felt that the collective had no business saying no. And we couldn’t come to a consensus and then at some point, somebody said, Well, can we at least try and do a majority thing here? And we did, and the minute we did it we were like, Oh — and we undid it, because we couldn’t live with it. And I think, in the end, they didn’t meet there, or they didn’t meet there then.

ANDERSON: Did you also then feel, in terms of feminist collectives like that one, any hostility around butchness, and gender expression?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, yeah, totally. I mean, it was a mixed bag in the building, because the people in the building were pretty much on the left end of the spectrum. And on the left end of the spectrum there was a lot of support for whatever. I mean, people being more masculine than not. But in the sort of more middle-class, I don’t know, Artimus Café world, there was, like, you know — and to actually present as butch was not a happy thing in San Francisco.

It was like, you know, emulating the patriarchy, being a man. Why do you want to be a man? In the meantime, they were all walking around in flannel shirts and combat boots. And I’m like. So your version of it is OK but because I actually tie my ties, you know, and wear men’s suits and men’s garments, undergarments, then somehow that’s different? Why is that? You know, and I actually, in order to survive in that context, I changed. I mean, I sort of moved away from the suits and ties and their more masculine presentation and adopted a more hippie sort of presentation — vest and jeans and shit like that. Every once in a while, I’d put on a tie, but I was unhappy, and I was incredibly unhappy with what I felt were real dictates about how I had to be and, you know, in the midst — the other thing that happened to me is that I began to be aware — I mean, I knew femme from New York but it was hard to know femme in this sort of context.
ANDERSON: What were the conversations around race and class in San Francisco in the 1980s and did you also feel the antagonism towards butchness or butch-femme from women of color?

VÁZQUEZ: No, I did not. Women of color — with very few exceptions, the women of color that worked at the Building were largely working-class women. The exceptions were lesbian feminists from other countries, from Peru and Argentina, who worked at the Building, who did come from more middle-class backgrounds but had an analysis of race and class in their take on feminism that was different. I mean, because — I don’t know why — because third world women had a different analysis that they brought with them to the experience at the Women’s Building. But even they, who were more — I don’t even know that I would say androgynous, they just had their own kind of unique styles — but they also were not hostile towards a gender expression that was different.

And you know, some of them were clearly identified as femme and liked it, and some were more in the androgynous mode. I was probably the most butch-identified of all of them, but I did not — no, the hostility definitely came from white feminists.

And the race and class conversations at the building, they were continuous. They really were. They imbued just about everything we did. You know, the discussions that we had around Samois were a lot based on the different perspectives that people had based on their race and their class.

The other huge controversy I remember at the Women’s Building was when policewomen who had formed a support group, I guess, asked to meet at the Women’s Building. And you know, it was interesting because even though they’re very different examples, there was some consistency in what the conflict was about. And the conflict was about a fundamental kind of vision of the Women’s Building as a safe haven, as a safe place for women to come, all women to come. And in the case of Samois, people felt that having women in there who embraced sadomasochism made it unsafe for people who saw sadomasochism as a sort of emulation of slavery. And in the case of the policewomen, people felt, You know what? They may be working-class women and maybe even most of them are women of color, but how are you going to have people who are illegal immigrants come into the building and see SFPD meeting on the second floor and feel safe?

So that was the nature of the controversy and the conversation that we were having. You know, it wasn’t about, Oh, they work for the police department — we didn’t care, necessarily. It was more about, What’s it going to say to the safety of immigrant women who come here seeking a safe place to stay? And Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who obviously were huge champions of women being out in their professions and figuring out how to create greater visibility for lesbians in everything — in politics, in the police department if that’s where they
were — just could not see that. They just could not see that. They were aghast at the notion that a women’s organization, many of whom were lesbians, for whom it took great courage to be out, should not be allowed to meet in the Women’s Building. And you know, the discussions went on for a long time.

I think, eventually, they did meet in the Women’s Building, but it took a lot of struggle to get to a place where we could create some comfort around it. And I forget what the actual resolution was. Maybe they didn’t say SFPD, maybe they said something else and knew that it was, you know, this support group for lesbians in the police department.

ANDERSON: What was your position on it, do you remember?

VÁZQUEZ: Oh, I was on the side that they shouldn’t meet there per the reasons that the rest of us, the other lesbians of color, were saying, we couldn’t have this — which was different from my position on Samois. I guess at some level, I — the Samois to me was about sex, and not about — I don’t know, not about slavery. Whereas the policewomen’s situation, I really felt and knew the experience of being — not an immigrant, because I wasn’t an immigrant, Puerto Ricans are citizens, but a migrant and an experience like an immigrant in a new country and how scary that is and how much you crave places where you’re going to — you know, safe houses. So, those are some of the discussions.

And then there were other discussions in the process of trying to merge the two organizations, there was overt discussion about the power that white women had, that Women’s Centers as the sort of owning entity had, that we did not have. And you know, the decision to merge meant that the collective of Women’s Centers would then expand and that the women working at the Building, that we were all the owners. And that was actually a great decision. It took many, many, many meetings. Actually Roma Guy bet me that people would not move their desks from one place to the other — bet me a dinner. And I won.

ANDERSON: It really diversified that board, didn’t it?

VÁZQUEZ: It completely diversified that board and changed the direction and history of the Women’s Building completely. I mean, the Women’s Building increasing became a place where women’s solidarity, Central American solidarity organizations met, where, you know, forums on Palestinian women and the conflict between Palestine and Israel could be discussed. You know, and before that, I mean, (unclear) were the staple, not discussions about what was happening to Palestine, in the Palestine-Israeli conflict or what was going on in Central America. So in terms of the kind of programming that the Building itself did, the cultural events that happened at the Center, the Building became imbued with a diverse multicultural life that didn’t exist there before that merger.
ANDERSON: Did you also make it mandate that the board, for example, needed to have at least 50 percent women of color?

VÁZQUEZ: Seventy-five percent. Yes, we made it a mandate that 75 percent of the people on the board had to be — or employed, not necessarily on the board — had to be women of color. And it was so for at least for as long as I was there. And you know, when I retired from the Women’s Building in 1991 from the board, they decided to turn it into a celebration and a fundraiser and a community celebration. And first, they had a small kind of private event where they did mean things to me and whatever, roasted me, and that was a lot of fun. But then they followed that with a community celebration that actually took place not at the Building but at Mission High School, because they had a big auditorium and it was a huge celebration of women of color. And it was in my honor, but it was in celebration of women of color. It was just a tremendously beautiful event, where Jay and Jacque sang and Barbara Nabors-Glass came back to do a little testimonial and they had other cultural things.

It was just — and I got to do this big good-bye speech that is still one of my favorite speeches. I remember talking in the speech about the role of women of color in the women’s movement and the necessity of the leadership of women of color to a progressive women’s movement, because I have no illusions that all of the women’s movement is progressive but the progressive wing of the women’s movement is one that needs to be led by women of color, but not because we’re innately born to lead, although some of us think that, but because of the lived experience of race and class that so many of us bring to feminism that enriches feminism.

And certainly, the Women’s Building experience was that, a lot that. You know, the Women’s Building was the reason for Somos Hermanas, which is the Central American solidarity organization that existed for, I don’t know, about six or eight years and did a lot of great work, material aid work and political education work. The Women’s Building was the reason for Dynamics of Color, which was a series of conferences that — first there were two conferences that were just for women of color that spawned women of color groups, an API group and an African American group and a Latino group. Coming Out and Coming Home, those things were called. And they were great, and provided women of color an opportunity to come together as women of color that didn’t happen, or happened very rarely — and have an analysis and have cultural celebration together. And that led to a conference called Dynamics of Color, which was a conference for all women, but focused on racism and really took a long, hard look at the ways in which white women understood their own racism, trying to figure out how to create alliance between white women and women of color.

The Women’s Building spawned a thing called LAFA, Lesbian Agenda For Action. There as a conference either called Lesbian Agenda For Action or I forget what the name of it was, but the conference was
specifically created, and LAFA existed for whatever it did to figure out how to support the involvement of lesbians in political life. So, you know, Carole Migden and Roberta Achtenberg and Barbara Cameron, and a ton of people who eventually did wind up in public office were a part of that effort.

So it was, for all of the ’80s and into the ’90s, a really critical site for the development of the women’s movement in San Francisco that had a strong foundation in a progressive race-class analysis, and that’s a good thing.

ANDERSON: Why did you leave the Women’s Building?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, because we going through an economic — a really difficult economic time, and that wasn’t just me, but a number of us just opted to go on unemployment and continued working. But like halfway through that, I decided I really just needed to leave. I was tired and I needed to leave. And this is when I went to Navarro with Leslie and found a goat and all of that. And I just was tired. It had been a long haul, I guess, and I needed a break and I took it.

When I came back from that break is when I was invited to participate in Somos Hermanas. The Alliance Against Women’s Oppression put together a delegation of — I think it was 18 of us, and I was invited. Marcie Gallo was a part of that delegation, Loretta Ross, Linda Burns. It was a great, great bunch of women and, like, not half and half but maybe ten straight and eight lesbian. I mean, it was a really well-integrated group of women — predominately women of color, but some white women. Roma Guy was a part of that delegation.

And the point of the delegation was to go to Nicaragua and experience firsthand what feminists in Nicaragua were doing, feeling, thinking about the revolution, about the Sandinista government, and the campaign that was underway in Nicaragua to educate — you know, the literacy campaign, the inoculation campaign. There was an enormous amount of work that had to be done in a very poor country to bring it up to some sort of decent standard of living and they were fully engaged — women were fully engaged in that work.

ANDERSON: What was the impact of that trip on your life?

VÁZQUEZ: Oh, my God. Many, many, many-fold — deep impact. On a political level, first, it finally brought the sort of Latina activist part of me, the socialist, communist part of me and the lesbian part of me all together. It just integrated all of that in a living, joyful, experience. And you know, and that was about being in a country that had had a successful revolution, where women were leaders. I mean, Comandante Dora Maria Tellez — oh, my God. She did not come out to us as a lesbian, but several of the women came out after the meeting wanting her baby, I’ll tell you that. You know, it was just phenomenal to be in an environment like that and to be embraced by them.
And it was interesting to me because they embraced us as allies, you know, as American allies, as women, and I really — I had long conversations with some of these women about being a lesbian and what it meant and they were curious and they were — their framework was often about, Well, of course, we don’t, you know, discriminate against homosexuals. We don’t discriminate against drug users or prostitutes. Wait, wait, wait — not exactly the same thing. So, I mean, we were having those discussions, but we were having them in a context of deep respect and you know, lots of rum and dancing, and so that made it easier, for sure. But they were wanting to learn and they were wanting to know, Well, how isn’t it like prostitution, or whatever. And so, on a political level, it was just a huge leap for me, that integration of all of those things.

And on a personal level, this is where I met Marcie and it is the wildest, most romantic kind of scene you can imagine. We were in a country at war. We were, you know, up 18 hours or more, 20 hours a day doing visits and learning and hearing all this stuff. Talk about loving in the war years. It just doesn’t get more intense than that. And so, it was an intense coming together. All comings together are intense, but on this delegation, you know, in a war zone, it was just unbelievable.

Soon after, I was invited to go to another delegation. I was invited to go on a Ford delegation to the Women’s World Conference in Nairobi. And I went. And did not fall in love again. I guess twice in year would’ve been much, although it was a phenomenal, another sort of mind-boggling experience of — so, twice in one year, I was outside of the United States context. We’re talking about feminism and race and class and all the rest of it, and it really, it was great for me to be exposed to the women of the world, who — you know, for whom, by the way, class was elevated way above race. I mean, in Africa, African women would look at us like, You’re crazy to talk about women of color. What color? And race was understood within the context of colonialism. But the central conflict was class, you know. And that was a very different sort of way for me to look at and understand my own struggle and the women’s movement.

ANDERSON: OK. So, after Nicaragua and Nairobi, then you began working with Community United Against Violence [CUAV]?

VÁZQUEZ: That is correct. You’ve got the chronology right. After 1986, I got involved with — well, I needed a job, and I — the experience, now it had been two years since I’d been at the Women’s Building. I sort of knew that I did not want to be the primary person responsible for fundraising or administration — not what I liked. I liked program work. I liked organizing work. I liked political work.

So, a position came open with Community United Against Violence in San Francisco and I grabbed it. And spent — how long was I with
them, two years? Two years, I guess. I went to the Health Department in 1988. But the two years at Community United Against Violence were another evolution. I mean, I went from working pretty much exclusively in a women’s movement, sort of, environment to working in the lesbian-gay, what was then the lesbian-gay, starting to become lesbian-gay-bisexual — still not transgender — but that movement. And that was another sort of rude awakening, because now, I’d gone through the struggles with white feminists and had some measure of, not comfort, but ability to sort of deal with that. And now I was in an environment where I had to deal with white men, white gay men.

ANDERSON: Up until this point, is your social cultural world really oriented around women?

VÁZQUEZ: For the most part, my social and political work life up until then was women. So this was my first, sort of, foray into the world of mixed genders. And it was hard. I mean, Diane Christensen is a young dyke who ran Community United Against Violence and was savvy in the political — you know, in the electoral politics kind of sense, and I wasn’t quite so much. I think I said yesterday that the deaths of the Kennedys and King and Malcolm X sort of really took me away from electoral politics as a place where I saw any possibility for hope or change. And so, that was also new. I was beginning to — I mean, I had to deal with electoral politics because CUAV’s funding came from the city, so we had to figure that out.

And also, at that time, my friend Barbara Cameron — may she rest in peace, Barbara passed away a couple of years ago — Barbara was deeply involved in the parade thing, the Lesbian, Gay Freedom Day Parade and celebration. And she was also deeply involved in the Alice B. Toklas Club. So Barbara — oh, God bless Barbara. I loved Barbara Cameron. Barbara Cameron and I became friends, I don’t even know how we met, but we loved each other right away and we became friends. And she’s her own Indian version of butch. But anyway, I got to be friends with them and we hung out for a year and Barbara started to involve me in the Alice B. Toklas politics business and in the parade business.

ANDERSON: Describe then one of those meetings at CUAV, Community United Against Violence, or the Toklas Club. What kind of conflicts would happen?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, here’s an example of Community United Against Violence conflict. There was a mayor’s race. Art Agnos-[Michael] Hennessey and the board of CUAV was in Hennessey’s pocket. I guess he was a sheriff and I think the funding for CUAV came to the Office of Criminal Justice and anyway — which meant that the director had a big investment in sort of supporting Hennessey. And I was a political activist with the Alice B. Toklas Club. This was wrong of me to have
done but I did it anyway. I gave my name in a political ad in support of Art Agnos and I — it was my name as an individual — there were all this sort of disclaimers about — but I worked for Community United Against Violence, and so that put the director in an awkward position. And she damn near fired me over it.

I actually quit Community United Against Violence not too long after that. But I had to have a discussion with not only her but members of the board. And it was just the most arrogant, you-don’t-know-what-you’re-doing kind — I mean, it was a discussion that really had no starting point, because I didn’t know what I was doing. I was wrong. How dare I? That kind of a discussion. And, um, I was angry enough that I quit before I could be fired — which completely freaked Marcie out because, you know, it meant that I had no income, and maybe not even unemployment. It was, like, You what? I fuckin’ quit. That’s what I did. Anyway, so that’s one example of it.

And then, there was also sort of, in terms of program, I’m trying to figure out — one of the things that I did at Community United Against Violence was, there was another project called, um — let me back up. Part of my job was to figure out what kind of violence is happening, who’s doing it, and then, based on that, what kind of responses, what kind of community organizing responses do we come up with to deal with it. And the statistics were overwhelming. You know, they were, like, 80 percent of the assailants involved in anti-gay and lesbian incidents were under 18 and the overwhelming majority of them were black and Latino kids. The majority of the victims were white men. So, what kind of a program are you going to come up with to counter that?

And so, I talked to the director about the possibility of taking that project on and developing it as a CUAV project and developing a speaker’s bureau, training people, sending people into the schools. And it was a great project. And you know, I felt strongly that I had to figure out how to recruit people of color into this project. And it’s never easy to recruit people of color into anything, especially when it’s a white-identified organization. But it’s harder when the people you are working for are like, What do you need? We’ve got a hundred volunteers here. Let’s just send them into the schools. And so, those are the kinds of things I faced at Community United Against Violence that made it difficult.

ANDERSON: And yet, your trajectory from this point on really is in the gay and lesbian movement. So, despite the fact that this posed a lot of challenges, it becomes your new home?

VÁZQUEZ: Right. It did become my new home because, you know, at Community United Against Violence, when I resigned, it was another sort of crisis moment in my life, because I went, OK, it’s been, I think at that point, nine years or so that I’d been employed and working in a gay world. And now, it was 1980 whatever it was — ’88? or ’87 or something like that, and I was on a job search, and what was I going to do? Was I going
to go be a lesbian? Was I going to go wear a tie? Was I going to go — I was certainly never going to put on a skirt, but you know, how was my résumé going to look? What kind of jobs was I going to look for? And I was actually pretty freaked out. I thought, I don’t know what other kind of work I can do. I don’t know if I’ll be invited to do any other kind of work.

And it was a really interesting process, because in the end I decided, You know what? If I can’t be out wherever it is that I am, I’m going to be so miserable that I probably won’t want to be there. So, I made a decision first that I would list my, you know, work and community history for exactly what it was and not doctor it and let the chips fall where they may. And I set out to find work. And what happened was that Gray Panthers offered me a job, the National Network, National Immigrant Rights Network offered me a job. These were all, you know, completely straight organizations. I came very close to a job with the American Friends Service Committee. And my sexual orientation was not an issue in any of those scenarios. There was actually another job where I was brought back for a second interview and it was a job working with kids, because of my counseling background and stuff like that.

And so I realized, Well, you know, I can do this. And I decided to take the job with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. And it was a challenge, because it was an ED job. The first ED — you know, they had a volunteer board and so they had to be developed. I had to organize a conference and I had to raise money. And you know, about six months into it, I was, like, Oh, I knew I didn’t want to be an ED. I knew that. Now, why did I want to do that again? So I was unhappy and looking, but in this process of looking for work, Pat Norman, who had saved my life several years before and had moved on to become Coordinator of Lesbian/Gay Health Services, resigned. So then several people said, “Huh.” And they called me and said, Why don’t you think about this? and I said, “Really?” And so, I eventually applied and then they said, Oh, we didn’t have a big enough pool — blah, blah, blah.

So, you know, I went on to do the work with the Immigrant Rights Network and about six months into the job, I got a call from the health department. They were ready to open the position again. So I went and applied and had some political strings pulled. I mean, I got a letter of recommendation from Harry Britt and political people that mattered, and I got the job.

And so, then I was back into the lesbian-gay mix. I didn’t really have a health background but I had an education background, which included a good amount of training and planning and in doing trainings, which was a big part of the job because the health department was doing trainings on homophobia and sexuality and I was intrigued by all of that. And the other part was really advocacy work. It was about figuring out what the community’s health needs were, whether they were being met or not, and how to meet them.
And I was tremendously intrigued because it gave me an opportunity to figure out, to learn policy and to learn budgets and to learn, you know, the political machinations of San Francisco. Because when you work, basically, in the director’s office in the health department, you have to understand the politics across the street, because that’s how it all happens. And funding from the community wasn’t going to happen without me becoming really smart really fast about the politics of the budget in San Francisco and how that all sort of trickled back to Sacramento and all that kind of stuff. So that became my entrée into the world of policy and politics of a different sort. Not like community club, democratic club politics but insider kind of politics.

ANDERSON: What was that like, even in a daily way, going from outsider activist advocacy nonprofit world into being a part of government, with the bureaucracy?

VÁZQUEZ: It was not easy, I’ll tell you. I mean I was an advisor to the director and to the other directors and to the commission, and I didn’t have a staff. I mean, this position was a one-person position. I had a committee. I had a great committee of people from throughout the department who gave a lot of time to a committee as part of their job. So, in a sense, I had staff, but anyway, it was — it was a bitch. It was a bitch for the first year. I mean, I had to learn the system, the politics.

I also had to learn how to be. Now, just back to my gender identity and all that, because — so now, I’m not doing this Building. I’m now a professional. And I had to figure out how to present myself. And, you know, perversely, the health department became the place where I adopted a butch professional public persona. Because I decided I just — that I wanted to be myself, that the effort to sort of camouflage that, or whatever, was taking away from being able to work and being able to be creative. And I don’t know, I just was tired of it, and I decided, You know what? I can wear better ties than those guys. So I did. I started coming to work in suits and ties and these shirts and ties and blazers and developing really the persona that I am now.

And you know, I’ll never forget going to my first hearing before the Health Commission, because part of my job entailed writing an annual report that detailed the existing state of health services for lesbian/gay people in San Francisco and they made recommendations about gaps in services, identified gaps in services and then recommendations about what needed to happen, including funding recommendations. Which was a big job. Just doing that was a big job.

And so, my first one, um, was obviously a huge deal. I mean, it was just little me going before a nine-member — I don’t know how many members of the commission — and that’s when I decided I would just go wear my best suit and tie and, you know — and nobody blinked an eye. Well, maybe a couple did. But there were also enough people in the audience and a couple of members of the commission who were queer...
that I felt I had enough support to do that, and so, then I just did it. And after that, I didn’t care. After that, you know, I just went as I pleased.

ANDERSON: Was it an all-white work environment?

VÁZQUEZ: Not at all. I mean, the people I reported to were actually — the top management of the health department at that time was pretty diverse. I mean, they had several people of color who were heads of divisions or the hospital. And the line staff really depended — it was, like, department by department. You know, like the health hazards or safety environmental department was almost all white. The public health planning department was very diverse and very integrated. So it just depended on where you went. Because it’s a civil service system, there’s a lot more diversity in the work force than in the private sector. And there’s some really terrific people of color, health advocates, that were involved at the time.

And I, after a year or so, I decided that I really needed to prioritize health services to people of color, youth, and lesbians, because white gay men had a lot of services, because the AIDS epidemic was raging then. You know, it was difficult to get the health department to pay attention. It was like, AIDS was all-consuming. And I understand that. But there’s still all these other populations that needed services that weren’t getting services.

And so, actually, San Francisco had a fairly sophisticated network of health service providers for mental health, substance abuse, much more so than anything I had experienced in New York, already in place. So it wasn’t like I had to invent those things. I just had to make sure that they continued to get funded, weren’t cut, organized them when cuts seemed to be looming, so that really, where there was a paucity of service and funding where youth people of color and lesbians — and that’s, for the remainder of my career as the Coordinator of Lesbian Gay Health Services, that’s really where I put my energy, is in the Department of Health in San Francisco.
INTERVIEW 2

ANDERSON: OK. This is our second taping. Kelly Anderson and Carmen Vázquez, but this time we’re in Provincetown.

ANDERSON: Have you ever hesitated to call yourself a feminist? Was there a time when it felt like an uncomfortable label?

VÁZQUEZ: You know, early on, very early, when I first got to San Francisco, I didn’t even know what a feminist was. Seriously, I really thought that people were talking about being feminine, which is not something I was interested in, so I was like, I don’t know what these people are talking about. And also, you know, what I understood of the feminist movement in 1978, ’80 and even into the early ’80s, when I really got involved in San Francisco politics, was very white. And so, you know, Gloria Steinem did not speak to me. I mean, I sort of admired what she did. I was glad that somebody was doing stuff to sort of stand up for women in the world, but she didn’t speak to me.

And it wasn’t until the experience of working and really learning and struggling with other women of color and reading other women of color that it became OK for me to accept a feminist identity. And part of that is about gender stuff, too, gender expression, because the late ’70s, early ’80s women’s movement, and probably still today, didn’t take kindly to a butch-identified person. And I didn’t quite know what to do with that. I felt pushed to a more androgynous expression of myself and you know, nobody that I was attracted to was remotely androgynous. They were all femmes and, you know, I had a hard time with that. I had a real hard time with it, and some of it was actually pretty deep-cutting kind of stuff.

And once again, the place I did not experience that was among women of color, who were — at least the women of color I was hanging out with — perfectly content to have butch-femme couples. And where there was more of a sense of androgyny, it still was not expected that everybody be that way. And the other thing around gender is that people did not equate a masculine femininity as somehow a betrayal of anything. We didn’t think of it that way. We thought of it as, Well, you know, if feminism is about being who you are, well then, this is a good thing. And so there was that, too.

ANDERSON: Did you call yourself a lesbian feminist? Is that a white women’s label? How did you feel about that term?

VÁZQUEZ: I called myself a dyke but I also did call myself a feminist. Lesbian feminist was the more public term and then the dyke is what I am and what we all were. And particularly among lesbians of color.
ANDERSON: I have a question about sort of language and terminology. What was the impact on your sense of self to live through all these changes in language, from third world women to women of color to lesbians of color?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, I have lived through a whole lot of language that describes the same person, which is fascinating to me. And my early experiences in the United States were decidedly of myself as a Puerto Rican because that’s who I was. I didn’t understand color and I didn’t understand third world. I had no concept of that until — I really don’t remember. I guess high school, college, when I started to become politicized. And I understood the term really to be about — I didn’t like it particularly. Something about it made me feel less, you know. The third world was sort of like, Where’s the first and the second? And I really didn’t have an explanation for that. But I also understood it to be a term that described colonized people and so it was OK. And I did identify as a third world dyke person.

And then when I moved to the Bay area, that was still the term in use, actually for a while yet, and I remember some beginnings of a shift in I guess mid the ’80s or something, because I was involved in helping to organize a conference for people of color, and there was enormous amount of talk and discussion and debate about whether we would be calling this a third world gathering or a people of color gathering. And I think — I don’t remember exactly — but I think if we go back and look at the records, that we wound up calling it both. And the discussions were fierce and intense around the concept of color, because we understood oppression to be about — I mean racism, you know — to be an expression of privilege based on skin color.

But for those of us who were not dark, it was like, I’m not sure I understand, because what about language and what about the ways in which Latino people and API people have been racialized in this country that has not to do with their skin color but with their cultural heritage and with their language and with the fact that they come from colonized places in the world. And so the whole black and other thing was huge, and actually painful. And some of what happened — there were two conferences like that — some of what happened at those conferences is that people had big discussions about this and I actually remember leading a workshop that dealt with not so much the language but what the language reflected in terms of cross-racial hostility and our sort of trying to come to terms with what does it mean. But eventually, so I moved through — I don’t know, about four years ago — this transition from third world to people of color, women of color, and I finally felt comfortable with it.

And then I went to the world women’s conference in Nairobi and I was back to third world. And you know, the women of Africa were like, What color? What are you talking about? (laughs) You Americans are very strange. So it was fascinating because sort of all the discussions we were having in the States, people of color [were] having in the States
about race and class and what is it — you know, racism — really about. Is it just about skin color? That really manifested in Africa, particularly with women from the third world whose framework for understanding their oppression was clearly much more articulated around class and colonialism than it was around race. And it was an eye opener for me and for the other women, and a real learning curve for me.

And then the other language that’s been perplexing and fabulous to be involved with is the language of gender, because butch and femme and kiki I understood back from being a teenager, but transsexual, transgender — you know, gender queers, gender defiance, gender transition — all that was totally new to me and to many of us in the late ’80s, ’90s. And I didn’t know where I fit in that. I mean, I’ve known myself not to be a transsexual person all my life and I really love the masculine expression that doesn’t have to be about transitioning gender, but I also loved the room created by the transgender movement for gender expression of a million different varieties. So it didn’t take me very long to feel that that’s a movement that I needed to be a part of and understand and appreciate. And so, I still don’t identify as a transgender person but I love the movement and I appreciate the opportunities and the space it has created for myself and other people whose gender expression is not quite what the world wants it to be.

ANDERSON: So, in looking back and reflecting on 20 years [in California], what happened to the movement and your community over that time period?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, when I arrived in San Francisco, there decidedly was a lesbian community and a lesbian part of the whole scene but what was visible was much more male. I mean, the Castro, the Polk area, Harvey Milk, those were the — I mean, that was the movement. And although lesbians were decidedly there and involved — I mean people like Sally Gearhart is a huge part of why Harvey Milk was Harvey Milk and became successful. And the Briggs campaign and, you know, people like Amber [Hollibaugh] were there doing stuff for years and years but, you know, it wasn’t seen, and certainly it did not have political power or did not have significant political power.

And by the time I left, that was just not true. I mean, the involvement of lesbians and lesbian feminists in the entire fabric of San Francisco’s social-political life just was tremendous in those 20 years. And I was a part of that, but it was — I mean, the Women’s Building conferences that we put together, the thing called lesbian — what was it, God, LAFA [Lesbian Agenda for Action]. It was an ad hoc attempt that was very successful, actually, I think, for a couple of years, to bring together lesbians with a particular and conscious desire to be involved in political life — to get lesbians elected to the board of supervisors, to get them appointed to the Board of Health or the Human Rights Commission as EDs of agencies in the cities. And Jean Harris, Barbara Cameron, Roma Guy, myself, Donna Hitchens, Roberta Achtenberg, Mary Morgan were all a part of that effort. And you know, by the time I
left San Francisco, God dammit if we didn’t have lesbians on the board of supervisors, and Donna Hitchens was a judge. You know, Roma Guy was on the Board of Health and Barbara Cameron was on some other commission. I mean, we actually accomplished what we set out to do, and LAFA sort of ceased to be needed.

And then, also towards the end of that time that I was there, lesbians of color began to organize in a more conscious way politically to get lesbians of color into the political mix in San Francisco. And I know that, you know, all the foundational work that Phyllis and Del did with the clubs and the police department and other agencies in the city, really had a huge impact on that being able to happen then, in the late ’80s, ’90s, because there had been an entrée and there had been the active involvement of lesbians, including lesbians of color, in the Alice B. Toklas Club and in other clubs in the city. And so that’s the biggest difference. I mean, we went from underground to most definitely front and center in the political spectrum of San Francisco.

ANDERSON: Including your position with health services. Why did you decide to end that?

VÁZQUEZ: The job and the move to New York were motivated by two things — ending the job and the move to New York. One is that in the last couple of years that I was in San Francisco, even though I had an enormous amount of autonomy in my position as Coordinator of Lesbian and Gay Health Services and did good things, I think, I was really frustrated with working within the confines of government. I wanted — back out. It was like, Enough already. I understand the budget process. I understand the politics of how all of this happens, and somebody else should do it. And I didn’t know what to do. I mean, the truth was — and part of what I just said about, you know, putting lesbians front and center in your political life in San Francisco is that it became — and probably this is still true, that in San Francisco, political leadership is tied up with elected office and/or appointments, and there is not a whole lot of room from the grassroots or community perspective to sort of play a leading role, unless you have the executive director[ship] of an agency, which [is] not exactly my cup of tea and I didn’t want to do that. I was bothered by a lot of people to run for office, and I didn’t want to do that. And I also didn’t particularly see myself as an effective — not really effective. I just don’t like administrative work and being the person primarily responsible for fundraising.

And so I wanted to do something different. I really wanted to be in a situation where I could affect change by creating programs and doing community organizing. And there is something about San Francisco where all that sort of accumulated political power gets people really, really lazy. And by that I mean that, you know, it’s very different when you’re going door to door fighting the Briggs Initiative to you think you can just legislate homophobia out of existence. You live in this bubble that’s not anything like the real world, and the last four years that I lived
in San Francisco — actually, because of my job and the uniqueness of that position and because I was on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Board, I got to do a lot of traveling around the country and speaking to different communities. And man, you know, I knew Spokane was a whole lot of big difference from San Francisco. San Francisco was Mars.

You know, the ’90s is also the beginning of the right wing’s sort of more conscious and orchestrated assaulted on us via ballot initiatives, and so I spent some time in Oregon and saw what was happening there. And I was in Colorado, talking to people about the viciousness of what they were experiencing, and I really felt like I wanted to do something outside of that — the lavender bubble that is San Francisco.

ANDERSON: How did you decide where your political priorities were in the early ’90s?

VÁZQUEZ: I think I — well, I know that I came to a point where I made a decision that my political priority was going to be the LGBT movement, for two reasons. One, because I felt that it’s a movement that’s enormously in need of some more political sophistication. (laughs) And two, because it’s a movement that needs to unravel racism in a way that it has not. And I felt, you know, I can make that contribution, or I can be one of the people that makes that contribution and that I wanted to do that work. And I — I love queers. I mean, I love queers and wanted to spend the rest of my life trying to figure out how do we organize a movement that is more diverse, inclusive, progressive, that really can speak to, you know, not the David Mixners or the Matt Foremans or the big hoohas of the world and — they are both great men. I have an issue with them, but that’s not the movement. You know, the movement is much more about the people in Spokane, you know, who fight ballot initiatives, or in Arkansas.

I mean, I was at a meeting in Kentucky just a couple of weeks ago, after I came back from England, where I met two women, both of them just recently — like within the last month — returned from a tour of duty in Iraq, who were at a queer political gathering at risk of losing their pensions, because they felt compelled to figure out what they could do to organize queers in Arkansas. Yes, I love that. I mean, and you know, I loved them. I thanked them for their service, even though I hate this fucking war and I hate this fucking president, but they were very brave women. And that’s the queer that I want to have a conversation with and do have opportunities to have conversations with. Or the queers, you know, who work for Make The Road By Walking in Brooklyn. You know, it’s a little community center totally radical and progressive that has done a lot of work for poor and Latino and African American communities in Brooklyn but has recently taken on the struggle around homophobia and developed an LGBT program. And so, that is where the movement needs to be bolstered and needs support.
And finally, I feel, you know, after 30-some years, I’m a bridge and I’m a translator. I can move between communities and try and facilitate dialogue that hopefully moves us all forward.

ANDERSON: Were you also, at that point, frustrated with the LGBT movement around issues of gender and feminism, or do you feel like race was their Achilles heel?

VÁZQUEZ: I think — yes. Forever I have been frustrated with the LGBT movement’s inability to really come to grips with gender and sexuality, and I’ve talked about it and written about it a lot. But I feel most deeply that race is its Achilles heel, that race is the reason that we’re in the mess we’re in, in terms of the whole marriage movement. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Say more about that.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, over many centuries it can appropriately, I think, be said that marriage is the sort of stage upon which huge battles over sexual and gender rights have been fought. It also has been a stage where huge battles around family and the definition of family, including the right of African Americans and Asians and other people of color to have families, to marry whom they want, all of that, has been fought. And so, it makes complete sense to me that, you know, we move into the twenty-first century and now there’s this big battle over whether or not people of the same sex should have this right and to have marriage be the stage upon which the struggle is fought.

But the reason I say racism has been the Achilles heel is, in this most recent battle for marriage equality, is that the very people that have the authority to speak to this as decidedly and profoundly a human rights issue and an issue of justice and equality and economic injustice are the people that have had virtually no voice, no leadership in the LGBT movement. So now the LGBT movement wants alliances with communities of color, wants spokespeople and messengers who have the authenticity to speak to this. And you know, it’s hard, because racism has really inhibited the capacity of people of color to play meaningful roles and leadership roles in this movement and/or it has sort of forced us to create autonomous movements in communities, and so, you know — so now we’re in this place.

And the other thing that is true is that the civil rights movement, the white — I’m sorry, the white leadership of the marriage movement have stubbornly sort of embraced the civil rights language imagery and just shoved it out there. And the truth is that for a whole generation or maybe a couple of generations of people of color, particularly black people, the civil rights movement is history, and you know what? A failure.

The Civil Rights Act was not a failure and certainly Brown v. Board of Education is sort of the attainment of formal, legal equality on the basis of race and gender, [and both] were huge advances for all of us.
politically. But the rollback of civil — of what that movement brought — I mean, when you look at the 2000 elections in Florida and other parts of the South where, you know, people were really disenfranchised, when you look at the rollbacks of affirmative action, when you look at the level of poverty and incarceration that black people are still faced with, I think it becomes hard for a young person of color to say, Whoopidoo, you know, I’m just going to go out there and celebrate the civil rights thing. It doesn’t resonate. And so we’re taking a term in a history in a framework that actually doesn’t work for whole communities of color themselves and we’re saying, Well, this applies to us and it just doesn’t work. And so — I mean, marriage is the example de jour, but in any sort of effort to sort of move ourselves towards that place of legal equality, no matter what you call it, and protection for our families — if there isn’t a really strong and working alliance with communities of color, it just will fail.

ANDERSON: With — I’m just going to jump ahead to ask how this gets talked about at the Pride Agenda, because I think of the Pride Agenda as sort of a mainstream organization that probably put a lot of effort behind the pro-marriage stuff.

VÁZQUEZ: I am the lead person complicating the debate within the organization, but staff, several board members, the executive director and my director of public policy, who takes a lead on the marriage stuff, are all much more aware of the complexity of the discussion that we’re having. And they also — I mean it’s why, at Pride Agenda, we’ve made a decision and I came to implement the development of Pride and Action, which is about really not talking to the gay world but talking to the straight world and figuring out how to reach communities of faith and people in unions and people in workplaces, and organizing specific people of color discussions about the place of marriage and where people understand it and where they don’t.

The other thing that’s true about Pride Agenda and marriage and family — although I’m only now being paid by Pride Agenda, I feel like I’ve been working with them for ten years — anyway, I used to tease them that they should just put [me] on salary and so they finally did — is that they have always placed marriage within the context of winning equality for our families. But this is about a family issue. A couple of years ago when Alan came on and I came on, the organization actually shifted its mission to reflect a broader understanding of what our struggle is, beyond equality as individuals to equality for our families, but also to bring justice into the picture and to understand that, you know, the struggle for formal equality can and will be won, maybe tomorrow and maybe in ten years, but that justice is a bigger, bigger, much bigger struggle that has to do with economic justice and has to do with gender and sexual rights and has to do with, you know, the quality of people’s lives.
And so Pride Agenda went from being this statewide advocacy organization to win equality for lesbian/gay people or something like that — civil rights, actually, I don’t even think it said equality — to being a statewide organization to win equality and justice for LGBT New Yorkers and our families. There’s a very different framing of what we do, and our programs, I think, reflect that. I think we have a long way to go in terms of effectively involving communities of color in the work that we do but that is decidedly a huge piece of what my agenda there is for the next two or three years. And I think it’s shared — I definitely think it’s shared by the staff and by the executive director.

ANDERSON: So let’s back up. Let’s talk about how you ended up back in New York.

VÁZQUEZ: All right. So, I needed to get out of San Francisco for all of those reasons that I said and then I was actually sitting in the backyard of the home that I shared with Marcie in Berkeley, and we were looking at ads, because for a while I had been looking for possible job things, and it was Marcie who saw an ad for a director of public policy at the LG, then — not BT — LG Community Center in New York City, and I went, Really? Give me that. So, I saw the ad and it sort of — the job description suited me to a tee and I thought, you know, This is a perfect job but it’s in New York. And so then that started a discussion between Marcie and I that sadly ended in divorce two years later, but initially at least, we sort of said, Well, you know, I should try. And my family, my biological family, still lived in New York. I was watching my nieces and nephews kind of get older without my being a part of their lives and I — that was another pull back to New York for me, a sort of personal family pull.

And so I applied for the job — and I applied and I loved it. I loved meeting Richard Burns. I love the Center. I mean, I’ve had a relationship with community centers of some sort forever. And I thought to myself, you know, They’re going to offer me the job and break my heart because they won’t be able to afford what I need to be able to move to New York. But they didn’t. They met my request, and so I came to New York to meet up with Amber and Marge, there you go, who lived in New York at the time. And really, when I moved back, Amber, Marge and Katherine Acey, were the people that I sort of had friendships with.

It was fabulous to be able to come back to New York as an out queer and as a fairly notorious one, and be in the middle of all the queer stuff. I mean, the Center was the perfect place to come to because in the matter of a month, I knew I had met everybody there was to know or meet in New York. And my introduction to my work at the Center was during the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall — ’94, yes, it would have been the twenty-fifth, and my first week back, I was standing in the auditorium at the Center, the CLAGS Center [Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at CUNY], on a panel with Marty Duberman and Joan Nestle and, you know, Cheryl Clark, and it was bizarre. It was like,
How did that happen? Here I am back at the school where I graduated so many years before to take a new position and be an out queer and be here with all these famous folk. It was really fabulous. I was completely like, knocked out. So.

ANDERSON: Describe your work at the Center.

VÁZQUEZ: At the Center — I came to the Center to be the director of public policy, which eventually evolved to be the director of public policy and governmental affairs. And it was in two parts, and the frustration that eventually led me to leave was always there in the two parts. One part was develop programs, policy programs, like Center Kids and later the Causes in Common initiative and the voter registration project that would involve the community in policy and political advocacy work around specific issues. And that part I loved because that’s what I love to do. And then the other was to be the Center’s representative in efforts to secure funding from government. So there it is again. I can never quite escape it. And you know, I did a great job. I developed a team, you know, our development director changed over time but our development director and our director of mental health and social services, who could speak to the programs that we could get funded — and off I went to Albany and D.C. and city council to, you know, put together the development of a relationship-building effort with elected officials that would lead to funding.

And in that work I really loved being partners with Empire State Pride Agenda and development of The Network [The New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network] because to me that wasn’t just a funding thing. That really was a community organizing thing that still exists and it’s very successful as a project of Pride Agenda. But the rest of it was really, really old-fashioned lobbying, you know, wear the leather out, tell the story, tell the story, keep coming back and telling the story, and it’s bizarre. When you ask for, you know, a million dollars, two million dollars, and you eventually get it you sort of feel like great, but it’s a bottomless hole, particularly when it’s an organization like the Center that has huge capital needs always and forever. And so I grew weary of that piece of it. I was always sort of going back and forth between the program development work or supervision of staff and the government work.

And then the other role that I played at the Center is a role that I played in many organizations, is to be the nudge around diversity and race issues and, you know, being more inclusive. And I was very much part of the discussions that led to the creation of a policy on the death penalty that really looked at the unequal and racist application of the death penalty as its lead argument, although there are some queer ways in which there is a case to be made about the death penalty being applied, you know, in a discriminatory manner against us. It’s not the overwhelming thing. And so, I was a part of that and I was a part of Causes in Common, which is the reproductive rights LGBT liberation
project at the Center — really, you know, a significant effort to make the case that these are movements that should naturally, politically be in alliance with each other and figuring out how to do that. And I was also very much a part of bringing Betty Powell & Associates to — Achebe, not Betty — to the Center to do a diversity initiative with us. And finally, [I’ve been] a part of the really strong advocacy efforts by transgender people at the Center, and Barbara Warren, to include bisexual and transgender in the actual name of the organization as well as to have our programming and advocacy work be reflective of that community’s needs.

END TAPE 5
ANDERSON: One of the things I want to go back to is Causes in Common. And can you also talk a little bit about your political framework and the connections between all the issues in your career over that time — did you feel any connection to the women’s health movement?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, yes and no. The health framework really got developed towards the end of my time at the Women’s Building, certainly during the time that I was working at the Anti-Violence Project, because I really had to delve deeply into the impact of homophobia on our lives. And in the health department, obviously — I was working for the health department so I had to have a health framework, but I really looked a lot at the connection between homophobia and healthcare and got to know some really terrific researchers, Pat Stevens and Joanne Hall, who were doing important work around trying to understand what particularly lesbians experience in healthcare, wherein how the often hostile, if not just negligent, but often hostile, encounters that lesbian women have with health providers that leads them to not seek healthcare until it’s too late. And the economics for a lot of lesbians is also that, you know, if you’re not covered, if your partner’s not covered, somebody doesn’t have health insurance so you just don’t go for routine healthcare like Pap smears and mammograms and you know, annual physicals and all that kind of stuff, and the stress of living your life under the daily assaults of homophobia then means that people live with a whole level of stress, like people live with racism that doesn’t get picked up automatically. So there has to be, you know, a way of figuring that out that’s unique and particular to lesbian women as well as to gay men, and so — and then there was AIDS.

I mean, AIDS was so huge that there was no way of not understanding that the work we were doing politically was both about repairing the damage of living in a homophobic world, the emotional, psychological and sometimes physical damage as well as the AIDS epidemic and sexually transmitted diseases that — obviously AIDS made — and then before AIDS, syphilis and gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted diseases were all about men. But clearly that was also happening for lesbians, even if AIDS wasn’t the killer for lesbians that it was for gay men. All of that led to, OK, we need a particular focus on lesbian healthcare.

And at the time, the ’80s and into the ’90s and still, there was a growing movement of lesbians addressing this issue from Washington, D.C., Helen Mautner. Amber was a part of that when she was at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and the Lesbian AIDS Project — many of us. And so, I was a part of that sort of group of people, maybe a dozen or so of us on a national level who wanted to figure out how to create policy changes at government level and how to increase resources at local levels specific to lesbian healthcare. And in San Francisco, that took the form of the Lyon-Martin Women’s Health Clinic as well as some groundbreaking studies on women’s sexual behaviors through the AIDS office in San Francisco, and
the continuing sort of support of community-based efforts to address
lesbian healthcare.

In New York, Center Kids was a project of the Center when I got
there. It was a volunteer-run thing that was really — the impetus for it was
the burgeoning number of lesbians, mostly, but also some gay men, who
were making decisions to have children in the late ’80s in New York, and
they came together really as a support group for themselves and that’s
what it was. It was a support group for parents. So sort of a little bit of a
mismomer because it wasn’t about the kids as much as it was about the
parents and/or people who were seeking to become parents. And that
work, which eventually we hired a staff person for — Terry Boggis was
still the director of Center Kids at the Center — really opened my eyes to
the phenomenal lack of resources available to lesbians and gay men, and
the impact on their health in terms of reproduction.

So, for example, because gay men can’t donate to sperm banks, people
were, you know, consenting either to sex or to donation of sperm that
wasn’t tested — you know, enormous potential for risk in that, because
assisted insemination costs an arm and a leg, as I well know, and in-vitro
fertilization is even more out of the stratosphere. The reproductive
technologies available to heterosexual people, fertility treatments and —
you know, you can diagnose infertility in a heterosexual couple and get
some insurance relief for it. You can’t do that with lesbians and you
certainly can’t do it for gay men. The whole question of surrogacy and the
ethics of that and the amount of money involved in that. The amount of
money involved in adoption.

So it all — it became clear to me that this sort of thing called the
reproductive rights movement identified in the United States more as an
abortion movement and not a reproductive rights movement — had real
impact on lesbians and gay men and bisexual and transgender people just
on a practical, economic and health level. The other thing that was always
clear to me, way back from 20 years ago, is that reproduction — the link
between sexuality and reproduction is absolutely key, the linchpin of the
political attack against queer people and I knew that, some feminists knew
that, but I assure you that this movement did not know that and still
doesn’t know that, not in a big way.

And so, politically, the link between sexual and gender rights and
reproductive rights and LGBT liberation was always clear in my mind, but
it wasn’t until 20 years later that I saw a possibility for a sort of practical
expression of that political understanding tied to the more practical
economic issues of, and health issues of people seeking to become parents
that led to the creation of Causes in Common.

And Causes in Common — first of all, it damn near killed me. I mean,
its was an idea that we had for a while. We didn’t call it Causes in
Common at first. We were just calling it our reproductive rights, LGBT
liberation coalition thing and we kept trying to — we did some
workshops, Terry [Boggis] and I did. We wrote some things and finally
got funding from the Ford Foundation to actually develop a project. And the project involved inviting reproductive rights leaders and LGBT leaders together to come and have a conversation about what we understood to be the political and policy links between the two movements and what sort of common ground could we agree on as places where we could support each others’ work and really understand that reproductive rights are intimate, I mean, deeply, profoundly about sexual and gender rights and, therefore, about LGBT liberation.

The whole history of privacy rights in this country is written legally about the reproductive rights movement. It’s about women’s right to privacy and, you know, being able to use contraceptives in the privacy of their homes. The Lawrence decision in Texas — when you read that decision it reads like a treatise on reproductive rights. And so, it was very clear that there needed to be, you know, sort of a philosophical/political overview of the legal history of privacy, how that’s the foundation for the arguments that we make about our own right to sexual freedom and equality, and so we had that discussion. We actually had written a very preliminary draft. We had spent about, oh I don’t know, two summers worth of poor little interns researching all over the world for cases and links, so that, you know, it wasn’t just a rhetorical argument but one really based in legal history and documentation of that history.

And so we brought people together and gave them a draft of something that they might consider, and then we had the discussion, we took the minutes and we sort of incorporated what they said into the draft, sent it back to them and said, Please critique this. And then I spent — me and an intern, Jenny, from CUNY Law — an entire summer, eight weeks, ten weeks, rewriting that document and putting it together as one document, which is now the pamphlet called Causes in Common. And [it’s] really a challenge to take 27 or 30 voices and opinions and thoughts and put it together as one sort of coherent document, which I think it’s fairly coherent. And that’s the project. It still goes on. More people are involved. There’s a significant number of LGBT organizations who have officially signed on to Causes in Common and now more and more reproductive rights organizations are being asked to sign on.

And what the project seeks to build is a nationally, actually, coalition of people who have signed on to Causes in Common who will do work together to lobby Congress and state legislatures, to increase the amount of dialogue that exists between the LGBT movement and the reproductive rights movement on things that we have in common.

ANDERSON: What were some of the biggest challenges that you remember in finding that common ground?

VÁZQUEZ: Yes, well, the biggest challenge comes from gay men — that’s just the truth. I think lesbians, although, you know, are at different levels of articulation, depending on their political history and sophistication — at
least get that my right to reproduce as a lesbian is challenged, threatened, et cetera and you know, the body thing. We get the body thing about the state intervening in our bodies, whereas I think that’s a much harder link for gay men to make and more of them are less interested in reproduction. They also — I mean, there’s even a fairly conservative wing of the gay world that says either this is not a gay issue, what are you talking about, or — and I say, Go read Lawrence (laughs) — or they actually think that it’s wrong, you know, that abortion is wrong, that we shouldn’t be involved in that, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So, I mean, that’s where most of the resistance has come from. I also think that it’s part of a larger debate about what’s a gay issue, what’s not a gay issue, and we should be focused and our agenda has to be about non-discrimination and the basis of sexual orientation. So anything that seems extraneous to that gets dumped.

And finally, there is — some of the debates centered around feeling that actually people in the gay movement, at least the progressive wing of the gay movement, has taken steps to stand with the reproductive rights movement. For example, part of our screen for candidates is a question about choice and — for candidates who want our endorsement. And that had been true for a number of years, we just didn’t add it. We didn’t just add it. But the same was not true for reproductive rights organizations, right. So, part of this dialogue is about, All right, if we’re going to do that — you know, if Planned Parenthood was going to go endorse a presidential candidate, are you just going to do it on the choice screen or are you also going to do it on the queer screen? And NARAL and all those other people — and so, that was a lesser piece of the argument, but it’s definitely there and some resentment around — we’ve stuck our neck out for these women, guys, people involved in the choice movement, and they haven’t reciprocated. So those are the general areas of resistance.

**ANDERSON:** From the reproductive rights end of it, did you find resistance in terms of — we already have enough problems, what do we need to be gay and lesbian-baited for? Why cause more trouble for ourselves?

**VÁZQUEZ:** Yes. From the reproductive side of the discussion, the biggest obstacle was the sense that we already are, you know, painted with a dark tar brush. We don’t need to take this one. We certainly don’t need to get mixed up with the marriage discussion now with, you know, pedophiles and — queer people with children, how weird is that, you know. And that’s also a part of some of the conservatism and mainstreaming of the reproductive rights movement that sort of wants to present the choice question as sort of more wholesome, more just about women. You know, women being able to make choices in their lives and lead productive lives.

And all of that is true but, you know, the piece of it that has to do with the messier side of what this is all about — you know, pregnant teens and the need for better prevention services and dealing with kids and drugs and the poverty issues and forced sterilization of women of color. That is not
the sort of — you know, that’s all beneath the iceberg, in terms of the reproductive rights movement. And so, to bring this unsavory kind of element into the national discussion about choice, it’s hard for some people. And we say, So what, get over it. I mean, there really fundamentally is a link here and if we don’t make it then no one else is going to out there and, you know, political candidates — the right makes — finally, the other element of this discussion is, for 30 years the right has made a direct link between the choice movement and the gay movement, and we keep saying, No, I don’t know, where is it? (laughs) I don’t know? What are they talking about?

ANDERSON: In addition to your paid activist work, you’ve also sat on a lot of boards, which I assume you consider part of your activism. So talk about doing activist work in that context, of board member versus an on-the-ground person, a service provider, a staff person. And which ones have worked and which ones have been more of a struggle?

VÁZQUEZ: OK. My activist life has encompassed every possible road imaginable — volunteer, staff person, director, board of directors. And you know, I’ve liked it all. It’s been good to play different roles in organizations. The places where, I think, I’ve both enjoyed it most and been most challenged have been the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force board of directors. I was on the board from 1990 to 1994. Urvashi Vaid was the executive director. Eric Rofes, Deborah Johnson, John D’Emilio, myself, were all part of the same board. It was a fairly, you know, star-studded cast of very opinionated, very articulate, very passionate people — Elizabeth Birch — which made for some very, very interesting board meetings and hard discussions. And I was on the exec actually, of the Task Force board at the time and — Deborah Johnson and myself, Eric Rofes — I don’t remember if Eric was on the exec or not, but — and John. We were all clearly identified as progressives or to the left of whatever, and so we played a very key role in continuing to steer the organization in a more progressive direction

And you know, the Task Force, although it had been around since forever — ’74 — it wasn’t until ’86 that it sort of began to kick up, in terms of its level of influence and organizing capacity. And it wasn’t until Urvashi came on as director that it actually had the potential to grow into something more than a thorn in HRC’s [Human Rights Campaign] side. (laughs) And she was a volatile, exciting, passionate leader, and so it was a very exciting and challenging time. I mean, the discussions that we had about things like whether or not to protest the first war in — was it Iraq, or Iran? — whatever, you know, the first Gulf War, which eventually the Task Force did take a position opposing that war. And let me tell you, it was not an easy decision to come to. We pressed the rest of the organization really hard on understanding economic justice as a queer
issue that had to be addressed in our programming and in our conference, annual conference. And so, it was a challenging and rewarding experience.

And actually, I have been a fairly permanent faculty on the Creating Change conference, which is the Task Force national conference, every year since I joined — since 1990 — and have presented workshops, done institutes on institutional racism. I did an institute with Amber and others on race, class, sex and gender that was mind-blowing. Did a couple of institutes, actually. I keynoted the darn thing in '96 and that was wild, because — and I actually have written another essay — I wrote an essay four years ago that really amplified on what I talked about at the keynote in '96, which was a call to action for — a call, always, to more progressive action on the part of this movement, but it focused on the '96 elections and it focused on marriage and family. And you know what? Nine years later, there we still all are.

And so, I’m going to give a speech at Sarah Lawrence [College] in October and I thought, why don’t I update — “Wounded Attachments” is what the speech was called. Marcie is still mad about it. (laughs) Why don’t I update “Wounded Attachments,” and then just before I came here, to Provincetown this week, I was cleaning out stuff at home and I found this essay that I wrote four years ago that is an update, you know. I still have to update it some more, but it’s a great piece on family.

Family is the place where we first get loved but also where we first get wounded and how, you know, most hetero — that happens irrespective of your sexual orientation but most heterosexuals get to go back and we don’t. And so, there’s a particularity about our journey towards the creation of family, whether that’s family with children or not. But the formation of relationships, committed relationships that may or may not include children, that I think is really unique and really special to look at — you know, what does it mean personally, then also what does it mean politically.

And part of my criticism of the movement then, around marriage, is that it was not framed by family, that it was a couples thing — that it was about the wedding cake and whatever, and about the license from the state, not about the day-to-day living realities of families and our struggle to create family, which is not just our struggle. I mean, the state has done this repeatedly to people. Part of the way that state controls people is by controlling how they create those very, very fundamental units of support and love and protection. And so, for us not to see our overriding struggle towards liberation within a family frame is really self-defeating. It’s what I was trying to say at Creating Change — some people heard it, some people didn’t — and what I’m still talking about and doing a lot of work on.

There’s three current roles that I serve as an activist. One is as a member of the National Advisory Board of the National Center for Lesbian Rights [NCLR], and I love that. I mean, what’s not to love? Kate Kendall, be still my heart. I love her so much. But also, you know, it’s one
of two national lesbian organizations, and so, how could I not help them out. Plus, I’ve been an NCLR supporter since they were the Lesbian Rights Project, way back in the day of Donna [Hitchens] and Roberta [Achtenberg], and because it’s not a formal board role but an advisory role, I sort of get the best of both worlds. I get to follow what they’re doing, get all their information, help them raise a little bit of money locally, but also literally advise. I mean, there’s a number of times when I’ve just been in the Bay Area or have been asked to come to sit with the board and talk about whatever — you know, the future of NCLR, racism, challenge them to think about what they do, about their work as the work of gender and sexual rights, not just sexual orientation, and even told them they should change their name and become the Roberta Achtenberg, Donna Hitchens Institute for Gender and Sexual Rights. And they all fell down and went, Ha! They are not ready to give up the lesbian identity yet, but they will one day. (laughter)

I’m also currently on the board of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies [CLAGS] — another fun, fun, fun thing to do. I mean, there’s some work but it’s not a traditional board, and so, it’s great fun to sit around with academics and scholars and community intellectuals and think about providing programming that will capture some of that work for future generations. And I just got elected — agreed to run for a second term, and what I want to do in that second term is really pay attention to the community intellectual piece of what CLAGS is about. I want to help create a fellowship for a community intellectual that is actually a living stipend, not a little token thing but something that allows someone like me — I wouldn’t, of course, be the one because I’m inventing it, but someone like me to take a year off and do a project, write a memoir, create a roundtable — I don’t know, you know, do a movie about the work of organizing and being in the community, and being both an organizer and an intellectual, which is a rare thing in our movement.

You know, organizers tend not to talk to intellectuals and vice versa, and also people don’t like each other terribly much. So I think that when you come across people like Alan Berube or, you know, Amber or myself or Colin Robinson — those are very, very valuable people and they deserve both recognition and a chance to do something with their work, which is hard for us to do, because we’re working all the time. We’re organizing and there’s 50 million things to do and meetings to go to, and who has time to sit down and write or create a film or do a project around your work. So, that’s what I want to do with CLAGS for my second term.

And finally, I am also now on the board of directors of, God help me, Equality Federation, which is the national federation of [LGBT] state advocacy groups and that’s a new board. It’s very much of a founding board, a working board, and I actually get to do it as part of my work at Pride Agenda, which I’m grateful for, because otherwise I wouldn’t be able to do it — it’s too much. But there my goal is always, as usual, to bring a voice of an antiracist, gender, sexuality perspective to the group,
but also to help move it — you know, I really think the movement needs a federation, and it doesn’t need to be a federation of state advocacy groups. It needs to be a federation of queer advocates, national advocates, and state advocates and local and regional advocates — to come together, you know, at least twice a year and say, hello, what’s going on? What’s the right up to now? How do we assess and strategize, and more importantly, collaborate on our responses to what the right is doing but also on more proactive sorts of ways of developing allies in the country who will support our perspective.

And so, I don’t envision another national organization so much as I envision a place to create collaboration, and I don’t think that it’s shared exactly by all of my fellow board members. I know it isn’t, but I think it’s a logical direction for this effort to take. And so, I want to spend, I don’t know, another year or two trying to do that.

ANDERSON: Can you talk a little bit about how developed as a writer and how you support your work as a writer — when and how do you find the time and mental energy to create the pieces that you have, and what kind of role does that play in your work and your life?

VÁZQUEZ: The writer in me has always been there. In fact, my first love was literature and writing, and what I was to become until Amelia Ash and all of that other stuff intervened way back in my early twenties. It’s always been a dual love. The drive to do, to create social change through action, as in political action and organizing, and the desire to analyze it, think about it, offer a personal perspective on it, to express just my own personal struggle has always been there. And so, I’ve sort of just juggled it all of my life. I mean, a lot of it has taken the form of public speaking and many of those speeches contain elements of both my political analysis and my personal struggle and I think because they do, they’re very effective pieces of speaking because it gives people a way to hook into the analysis.

I also — I’ve actually written some poetry that nobody knows about. I read it a few times when I lived in the Bay Area. I don’t think of myself as a poet but I write like a poet. Even my essays sort of have some of that element. And then the essays — you know, I’ve [been] pushed to it a lot by other people who have said, Please write something for me, and I go, Well, all right, and then I write something. There have been a few times when I — like with this piece that I’m looking at here, I’ve just decided that there’s something clunking around in my head that I want to write down and figure out how to make it part of the public record. And sometimes, that has been very volatile, although usually not. You know, usually they’re like parts of collections of, you know, anthologies and stuff.

But I remember writing a piece about HRC’s decision to endorse Al D’Amato instead of Chuck Schumer that was a very short piece. It eventually got published by Gay Community News as a sort of editorial.
(laughs) But this is something that I wrote in the heat of furor with HRC for daring, not only to intervene in a local race that was really critical for queers, but also for intervening in a manner in which they did, which was to endorse one of the most racist, homophobic assholes in the country, with deep, deep pockets to fund the very work that HRC is supposed to be — so anyway, I was furious, furious, furious. I couldn’t stand it and I wrote this thing that, you know, criticized HRC for the endorsement but then went beyond to criticize the organization in its overall sort of priorities and policies, suggesting to people that one thing they can do about this is to withdraw their memberships. And oh, it was such a scandal. And so that was a piece I just sent to somebody at the Task Force and said, “Please get it out there.” And they did, but then it became a part of the public. And so, that’s a lot of what I do. I mean, I sort of respond to requests or write things for something that I know I want to do, you know, like a speaking engagement. And what I have not done, although I’ve made several aborted attempts to start doing it, is to write a memoir, and it’s time that I did that — take the aborted attempts and put them back together again.

ANDERSON: So what’s next for you? What do you see on the horizon for the next few years?

VÁZQUEZ: I talked about some of it in terms of the national work I want to do. And I see myself staying with Pride Agenda for, I don’t know, a few years to sort of really solidify and grow those programs. And I decidedly want to do more of the public intellectual — it’s time. It’s just really time for me to pay more attention to that part of my life — to write more, to speak more.

ANDERSON: For our last few minutes, maybe you could reflect on the future of the movement and of I’m interested in hearing about what gives you hope and what you see happening politically that gives us all reason to believe that progressive change is still possible. Where do you see some really exciting things happening?

VÁZQUEZ: Well, the most exciting work that is happening in the LGBT movement truly is happening at the local level. I mean, that’s sort of a truism and an oversimplification and everybody says it, but it’s really true. It’s actually always been true, but now there is a level of development at state and local levels that is hugely much more sophisticated than it was five years ago, ten years ago. And some of that has risen from the necessity of responding to the right’s attacks through ballot initiatives. And so, people at local and state levels have developed databases and organizing strategies and political sense that they just didn’t have even five years ago.
And what’s most hopeful about that development to me is that there is, in a very real and sort of day-to-day, intimate way, a necessity for men and women to work together, for people to understand that all this sort of rhetoric they put in the past into developing relationships with straight allies and communities of color and working communities and unions and stuff like that now has to happen — you know, in the more progressive ranks of the LGBT movement, I think that consciousness and that language has been there, but the practical application of it has not. And now, folks are — we are literally with our backs to the wall. I mean, the relentless nature of the attacks from the right have compelled us into that place. So that gives me hope.

I am made hopeful by — always, still, this is still true. I said in some speech when I left the Women’s Building that, you know, that people of color will lead this movement. That if it is to succeed, it will succeed because of the involvement and leadership of people of color, not because we’re smarter or cuter or — although sometimes that’s true (laughs) — but because of the lived experience, and the bridge-building and alliance-building that this movement requires if it is to move past the stage of, you know, just me, and truly be about justice and about the shared struggles of different oppressed people. That experience lies with people of color. And so, we — Nadine Smith and I are older examples or more mature examples of that truth that I’m talking about. But then I look at somebody like Rashad [Robinson], who is 25 years old, African American, works at GLAAD [Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation]. A little snip of a guy, who is so brilliant and so full of this phenomenal energy. I see the work being done to organize African Americans and Latino people initially around this marriage thing but now more broadly, and it gives me more hope that that leadership will emerge and —

And I’m also made hopeful, especially in the work that I’ve started doing in New York and with the Equality Federation, around building alliances with straight people. You know, we have so been inured from the necessity of actually figuring out how to do that and having straight people stand with us, that it has been to our detriment. And I think that the opportunity — hopefully we’ll have the smarts and the resources to actually act on that opportunity. It’s a big if, but if we do, the opportunity to build a movement around gender and sexual rights that is very broad, that really does include our mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and co-workers and the people that, you know, people worship with if they worship, and union people — is there for the taking. It’s really a matter of how well are we going to organize ourselves and what kind of resources can we put into that kind of alliance work. And I see that moment being much more possible now than it was five, ten, 15, 20 years ago, when we were sort of out there on the fringe and not so much a part of the daily conversation of average Americans.

And then finally, I had a big old, drag-out fight with a couple of very dear friends the other night about this concept of patriotism, because I do
consider myself a patriot. I think we have a really horrific government at the moment, with really terrible people in positions of leadership in that government. But somebody like Cindy Sheehan comes along and I go, you know, The people who built this country, who still make this country run — there’s a lot of like yahoos out there that are nasty, terrible people who say terrible things about us, but there’s also just a lot of really decent, hard-working people who are not like that and who, I think, have really been pushed to the edge of what they can deal with in terms of the contradictions of this economy. The global economy, you know, the racial tensions, the lack of healthcare — all of that I see sort of culminating in the rebuilding of a more progressive movement in this country that, you know, that won’t be led by national organizations or big-time leaders, that really will emerge from the terrible, terrible frustration that people have been experiencing for a long time in this country. But when you live in the lap of capitalist luxury, it’s easy to sort of ignore it or feel like you’re above it or somehow you’re not connected to those people in Pakistan or Iran or Iraq or — and now we can’t do that anymore.

And I think — you know, I’m made hopeful by the emergence of people like Barack Obama as political leadership of this country, because I think there’s going to be more people like him who step forward and have a much more progressive and reasoned approach to how to deal with the international community, our economy and our own internal struggles and contradictions around race and class and sexual orientation. So that’s what makes me hopeful.

ANDERSON: What do you think one of the biggest mistakes your generation made, in terms of strategy or vision, that you would like to caution my generation against?

VÁZQUEZ: Isolation, meaning, you know, building a movement around an identity that is too narrow to really pull other people into — I call that isolation. And the other is the, the mistaken notion that what we ought to be about it integration and assimilation. We have an opportunity to carve out a different vision, a different world, a different understanding of family, how it gets structured, how people get to protect those families. And we should take every opportunity to sort of scream to the heavens what that difference is and celebrate it and understand it for its unique contribution of the whole of what this society looks like — you know, sort of understand the evolution of where we come from. We come from terrible, terrible pain and being wounded and hiding in bars and people’s living rooms and not being able to sort of shout our name if not our love. But it’s over. It’s got to be over.

And the next generation of LGBT leadership has the capacity and I hope will take the opportunity to build on what has been created by several generations of queers who came from much more wounded places, and to be able to be queer and progressive. Queer and — you know, to
bring a sensibility of what that queer life has given us and given you, into your work as peace activists and your work as environmental activists and your work as reproductive rights activists, you know what I mean? One of the terrible, terrible things, I think, that homophobia did to us is that, you know, we built the infrastructure of the reproductive rights movement and the domestic violence movement and so other many movements, but we weren’t out in those movements. And so, visibility, I think, will be really critical and an embracing of queer sensibility as something that enhances the whole of society rather than something that should be scratched and hidden and somehow made to look like straight, heterosexual life.

And finally, I would say that there was a refusal, if not reluctance, on the part of my generation of queers to be absolutely fierce in the articulation of the connections between race and class and gender and sexuality. That has really been to our detriment. That has made it very hard for us to, you know, to make those alliances I’m talking about. And so, that is something that this generation does have to do over and over and over again — be really clear and articulate about what those connections are and take every opportunity, not just to make it intellectually clear, but to act on them, so that change will be possible.
Conclusions

Read together, the life narratives of Katherine Acey, Dorothy Allison, Suzanne Pharr, Achebe Powell, and Carmen Vázquez offer compelling new insights about feminisms, lives dedicated to social change, and the political complexities of modern lesbian identities. Their personal histories contain overlap and many more differences. What can we learn—about women’s activism, about social justice movements, about leadership—from this cohort of activists?

Many themes emerge from these oral histories that may be buried in traditional (non-oral) archival sources. For example, we learn that most of these narrators struggled with the impact of violence during childhood. Vázquez and Allison particularly struggle with the shame of sexual violence and abuse in the home, as well as the social violence against poor and working class people. Like Acey, Pharr, and Powell, their entry point into feminism is anti-violence work and all five are engaged deeply with the battered women’s movement, the anti-rape movement, and the fight against hate crimes and state-sanctioned violence. One of the lessons, for me, in doing oral histories with women is the staggering degree to which violence saturates our lives and how robust anti-violence efforts have been because of the service of so many survivors.

Their stories of survival tell us about resiliency. What buoyed these women during those embattled early years, as girl children in this culture? I was surprised to hear about the powerful role of religion, religious schooling, and nuns, in particular, in their lives. Vázquez says their kindness and mentorship saved her life. Acey called them “feminist role models” and, like many lesbians I’ve interviewed, was both in love with the nuns and fairly certain she was on a path to the convent. For Powell, who attended the Catholic College of Saint Catherine, the sisters were crucial in forming who she is as a social justice activist. “The shaping (of who I was) took over from where my father left off, in term of expansion, expansion. Here it was expansion of the mind, expansion of the spirit, expansion of a political view and a sense of responsibility.”

In addition to the crucial support of mentors, all five narrators possessed innate leadership qualities as young people, a “that’s not fair” sense of right and wrong that led to rebellion against race, class, and gender hierarchies. Suzanne Pharr, forever a tomboy, would not settle for the expectations and roles placed on Southern, rural girls. Vázquez defied the expectations of low

achievement for Puerto Rican children in the New York City school system and insisted on claiming her intelligence and talents to school administrators. Achebe Powell developed a social justice conscience early on, drawing on the righteousness taught by her faith and, as a result of travels with her father, her worldly views on race and power. In 1965, Powell got involved with the National Conference of Christians and Jews, activity that was considered dangerous and even illegal during the McCarthy period, almost costing her a high school diploma. For Katherine Acey, being told that girls cannot be class president in the 8th grade radicalized her and she went on to be a student leader all throughout high school. She fused the sense of righteous indignation of being told “no,” based on gender, with the tenets of Catholicism she held dear—faith, hope, and charity—and set in motion a life-long commitment to the care of others and to organizing.

Early experiences of injustices were instrumental in stoking the fire in the belly of these activists. Yet it was profound experiences of exile, of isolation, that shaped a worldview that would become a social justice lens. Themes of feeling different as a young person, whether that was about class or race or gender or even the love of books, is a common thread for these narrators. And as they entered the movement or the lesbian community, that sense of ostracization keenly impacted their politics. Katherine Acey talked about the invisibility of her racial identity in early movement politics. Wanting to know if she was black, white, or Latina, Acey laments that no one ever asked if she was Arab or Lebanese, identities that were invisible and out of bounds for an oversimplified binary of black and white. Even in women of color caucuses later in the movement, she was met with confusion and skepticism because of her unmarked racial category. The resulting inner turmoil was painful, but ultimately a guiding force in her journey to an integrated sense of self and an integrated politic.

For Dorothy Allison, the exile and isolation meant a quest for family. In her eyes, that meant a safety net, the sharing of resources, and a knowing that comes with intimacy. Allison sought that out in the women’s movement in an attempt to find a shared story, the resources to survive, and an intimacy that she could trust. Suzanne Pharr talks about the agony of being exiled from family, community, and God because of her sexuality. She struggled with feeling whole, with the ethics of lying about her sexuality by her silence, and with integrating her spirituality with her lesbianism. Pharr found a path to wholeness through feminism, though says it wasn’t without struggle. But for all, the sense of being the “only one,” whether in families or
caucuses or communities, was radicalizing, profoundly shaping a politics of inclusion and intersectionality that has become their legacy.

Out of isolation and tokenism, comes a politics of inclusion and wholeness. And in that work, bridge builders are created. Achebe Powell often had the experience of being the “only one”—the only lesbian in a room of civil right activists; the only black woman in a feminist organization; the only black lesbian among black feminists. Like Carmen Vázquez, she thinks of herself as a translator and a bridge builder between movements and communities. Under Katherine Acey’s leadership, the Astraea Foundation has become the model of inclusion and diversity whether the category is race, sexuality, or gender presentation.

Lastly, what remains from these stories is tenacity, the belief in and dedication to feminism, despite…. Despite rejection and vilification by other feminists, despite lesbian-baiting, despite the insipid race and class bias that has created an atmosphere of hostility for women of color, despite being the “only one,” despite the backlash of the Reagan-Bush eras, despite having a bigger vision for justice than feminism could sometimes hold. For Katherine Acey, Dorothy Allison, Suzanne Pharr, Achebe Powell, and Carmen Vázquez, feminism gave them their life. And in return, they gave theirs, elevating its true promise and potential.

What do their narratives mean for the larger project of the histories of feminism and LGBT activism? The history of U.S. feminisms must be understood as part of a nexus of radical social justice movements happening simultaneously from the 1960s onward. The women’s movement’s roots are in civil rights, labor, environmental, welfare, peace, and LGBT liberation movements. Simultaneously, women’s liberationists took new skills, practices, and worldviews to their political commitments elsewhere. Social justice work has been and is a dynamic interaction between people and ideologies and much of that conversation has been facilitated by the kind of women I have documented, women and lesbians at the crux of intersections and overlap. The complexities of women’s lives and of social change can no longer be documented, or be effective politically, if left in outmoded silos designated by singular identity categories. Lesbians active in the liberation movements of the last fifty years have understood this imperative because of their lived experience.
Pat Parker, the African American lesbian poet, said it best in 1978:

“If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, “No, you stay home tonight, you won’t be welcome,” because I’m going to an all-white party where I can be gay, but not Black. Or I’m going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are anti-homosexual, or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. The day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I would call a revolution.”59

What we now refer to as intersectionality, a term first coined by Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989, was developed and honed by lesbians of color. Anti-racist allies like Suzanne Pharr and others shared in the work of pushing the women’s movement in the direction of human rights and social justice. This narrative of feminism has been buried beneath a mainstream discourse of liberal reform and rights. By documenting the stories of radical lesbian activists, who have been working in “the movement” for decades, we can profoundly shift our understanding of the second wave. Feminism did not happen in isolation; the women’s movement was the home for a politic that was pro-sex, anti-racist, and intersectional in analysis and strategy; and lesbian-identified women were its foot-soldiers.

Lastly, as bridge builder myself, a Stonewall child in awe of my elders and a teacher of young women and queers, I am deeply concerned about the generational transmission of knowledge. Young activists are sadly misinformed about our past, the most troubling manifestation of which is an utter disregard for the legacy of a multi-faceted and revolutionary gender and sexual liberation movement. It is in the hope for a more nuanced and “retrofitted” cross-generational conversation about our history that I enter the conversation.

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