Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Tom Hayden
Interviewer: Whitney Strub
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WHITNEY STRUB: The other thing I was going to ask you about, if you're up for it, is LGBT stuff related to NCUP [Newark Community Union Project]. Because that's something—and separate from [Robert] Kramer, of course, but—that I'm involved with, as well, in Newark. I figured as long as I'm speaking with you, I would love to hear your memories, whatever they might be, of exactly how that played out or was visible at the time. Carl Wittman, obviously, is the most iconic, Carol [Glassman], of course. I don't know if there's more to the story than all of that.

TOM HAYDEN: The story being?

WHITNEY STRUB: Well, I guess how visibility played out, how people responded. Because clearly, my sense is, these were not issues that were verbally discussed or articulated at the time, and yet there was a sort of unspoken awareness and knowledge.

TOM HAYDEN: I think that's right. Things can move really rapidly. You know what I'm talking about '64, and things were quite different by '69. Stonewall was '69 or January of '70.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah, summer of '69.

TOM HAYDEN: And Carl was there, or issued his gay manifesto outta that, which was based on Port Huron. I don't know how widespread it is, but there's this sort of irksome group of young LGBT historians who are tryin' to make their reputation and publishing books. You're not the first, you're about the fourth, that's come to me seeking to vindicate the idea that I was very anti-gay at the time. **[02:00]** There's no there there. It is possible that the quote attributed to me in these books has been erased from my memory, although I have a very good memory. It's also possible that the questioning has planted it in my memory as if it did happen. 'Cause I remember, my first word when I was two or something, was "hot" because I had touched a heater in my house. As I try to reconstruct how memory works, I think

it's because my father and mother said "hot" and then told me as I was growing up that I said "hot." Now I have this clear image of myself, I was about this big, saying, "hot."

It might not've happened. It's one of those things. Until somebody asked me about it, it never occurred to me that I said that. Then I talked to—I don't know who I talked—I think I talked to Carol about it. Did ya talk to her?

WHITNEY STRUB: We talked about Kramer and *Troublemakers*. We're going to do a long-form oral history of lesbian life in Newark, but we haven't done that yet.

TOM HAYDEN: Okay. Neither of us could remember anything like that, as far I remember. I don't wanna put words in her mouth. I asked her. Maybe I asked Steve Block. I dunno. We also agreed that it was sort of hard to understand, for a later generation of historians or activists, that it could be quite normal, since you're doing anti-poverty, civil rights organizing, that there would be unspoken rules or understandings that you don't do drugs and you don't do sex. Of course. I mean, that's our—of course. Why would you do that? If you're knocking on doors about poverty, you wouldn't say, "By the way, we support gay rights" because no one even knew what gay rights were or they thought it was something obscene. It was not necessary to enforce a rule because nobody was openly doing any drugs or sex. There was also an understanding that you don't have sex with community people. Maybe it happened here and there. It was so obvious, I don’t remember posting any rule. It is true that Carl had a resentment, but I think it was a resentment of me and it was combined with a resentment of his having given himself to liberation movements, so-called, while repressing his own identity. He came out rather dramatically and forcefully in reaction to his Old Left/New Left past. I don't know when. '69, I'm guessing.

WHITNEY STRUB: I think '68 was his liberation essay, and then '69 was the gay manifesto.

TOM HAYDEN: Okay. All right. To think that he was reacting to rules that I had verbally imposed is **[06:00]** —it's a disservice to his own history, because he can't speak of it. I mean, he came to not like me because at first, he—I think he

liked me a bit too much. I have this affect, particularly on men, but on a lotta people, as being so charismatic or iconic in their presence, without my understanding it, that they—I don't—that their behavior is hard for me to fathom. If I criticize them, it's a huge blow. I was pretty unconscious on all those levels at the time. Anyway, he came to me outta Cambridge and was—played a very convincing role in the formation of NCUP and the larger strategy of ERAP and we wrote a paper together, which was wrong, called "An Interracial Movement Of the Poor." It was a stab. It was kind of a residue of his inherited Marxism class analysis, combined with my civil rights experience in the South and his in Maryland. The core of it was not a bad idea, that in poor communities, there needed to be base-building organizations to compliment the movement that had started in the South. There was an organization in Appalachia, I dunno, a dozen, 13 places. A lotta people, a couple hundred people—this is very interesting that it's been forgotten—committed their lives to this future, thinking that we were gonna give up our 20's and spend at least ten years doing this, before Vietnam. Carl had a lot to do, I guess, with the selection of Newark, although I don't remember that as a historical fact. It's not something that notes were taken on. I think it's because he was from New Jersey.

WHITNEY STRUB: I think that would make sense. Yeah.

TOM HAYDEN: He's from Newark suburbs. He was totally wrong. He met this guy, Stanley Winters, who was an old leftie who turned into sort of a liberal, and had a homeowners group. Carl, for some reason, thought we were gonna be immersed among the black and white poor.

WHITNEY STRUB: Right. Clinton Hill was too diverse a community.

TOM HAYDEN: It's all white.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah.

TOM HAYDEN: We arrived there and looked around and said, "Okay. Let's rent an apartment." The whole idea was based on a false intel, we would say. Everybody just adjusted to it. Then at some point in this short history there—let's see. My first encounter with, shall we say, clear

homosexuality was in the—earlier, when I'd met Bayard Rustin and Tom Kahn, who had this secret relationship, but everybody knew about it. I was at their house. I knew they lived together. I knew they had a weird house full of 300 clocks. I was exposed to the so-called gay lifestyle and thought it was weird, but not threatening. It was just like, "Okay. That's who they are." I could understand how that would get them in trouble, because they were closeted. **[10:00]** I could understand the danger to all of us of the trouble because it'd make them vulnerable to exploitation by the intelligence services. Kahn winds up funded by the CIA.

WHITNEY STRUB: Right, and Rustin ends up marginalized in the Civil Rights movement.

TOM HAYDEN: No. He wound up supporting the war in Vietnam. That's' why he was marginalized.

WHITNEY STRUB: Well, and booted out of the March on Washington.

TOM HAYDEN: Yeah. That's '63.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah.

TOM HAYDEN: Then Carl had a friend, Vernon Grizzard, who I believe is dead, who was a very young—a stereotype of the young, gay boy. Great guy, organizer. I think he's from the South. We noticed that they were always sleeping in the back of Carl's station wagon. Draw your own conclusions. I don't remember anyone ever worried about it or thinking it was strange. Or they'd wind up sleeping in sleeping bags on the floor of the living room.

WHITNEY STRUB: This is in Newark now?

TOM HAYDEN: Yeah. Yeah. It was there in plain sight, but I can't—and I don't think I'm blocking anything. I don't remember anybody cared about it. I don't remember them every sayin', "By the way, we're gay. We wanna be—"

WHITNEY STRUB: Oh, sure. Sure.

TOM HAYDEN: I don't remember anything except just that—I remember we had one guy, the recruiter from the community, the teenage guy, black guy, who slept in the fuckin' closet. Nobody said that's weird, either. I dunno. I can't understand it. It was a large collective and people were fucking or not fucking or sleeping in closets or sleeping on the floor, changing partners. I

just remember that without having to pronounce it, it was understood that you were organizing around poverty and around race. You were not organizing around what we considered lifestyle issues, especially if they were controversial in the community. You didn't need to tell people, "Don't do that." It was automatic. There was something obviously simmering there because it was weird to have unspoken relationships in the apartment. To never speak of these things was totally weird. Carl at some point, I suppose, but maybe others, said, "No. This is who we are." I don't remember the "aha" moment.

WHITNEY STRUB Okay. He never verbally articulated any of this to you at the time?

TOM HAYDEN: No. He articulated sexual desire. He articulated hostility. He was a very emotional guy, sometimes.

WHITNEY STRUB: What do you mean "articulated sexual desire?"

TOM HAYDEN: He said that he kind of wanted me or he physically wanted me. He carried a lot of resentments that I wish he was here to explain. 'Cause I don't really—there's layers—bourgeois, New Jersey suburbs, Marxist family background, blending in to avoid McCarthyism, Swarthmore—I don't know what happened at Swarthmore in terms of his development—then Cambridge, and putting his life on the line in civil rights protests while his inner life was up for grabs or—I don't know. It's a great story. I don't know who—the historians of your generation don't know anything about it. This one guy who wrote a book blaming me for sayin' this—

WHITNEY STRUB: Which book is that, do you know?

TOM HAYDEN: It's a big history of the gay struggle. I don't have it.

WHITNEY STRUB: I mean, I'm very familiar with the *[cross talk 14:46]*.

TOM HAYDEN: He didn't know what he's talking about. He never asked me. He thought it was really cool to attack me.

WHITNEY STRUB: I mean, it's a complicated story, right?

TOM HAYDEN: No. It's not complicated.

WHITNEY STRUB: Well, it's complicated in that the New Left—

TOM HAYDEN: I didn't say it.

WHITNEY STRUB: **[15:00]** Okay. Well, that— That's fair enough, no, totally, on that point, In the broader point –

TOM HAYDEN: He didn't even say, "Hayden denied sayin' it." He couldn't find anyone to confirm that Hayden said it.

WHITNEY STRUB: I wish you could remember which book it is.

TOM HAYDEN: He's a historian.

WHITNEY STRUB: I definitely—

TOM HAYDEN: It's a nice looking hardcover book a couple years ago. Two or three guys with the same agenda have preceded you to ask me the same questions. They keep kinda scraping around in the story, to a point where I'm beginning to think they're right and I must be in denial. I can't even get my friends to remember that it was ever—

WHITNEY STRUB: Right.

TOM HAYDEN: The consensus seems to be, "You didn't have to say it. No one in their right mind would say, "We're openly gay and we're—marijuana and heroin are on offer here on our front step." A parallel thing, which was said, shows you how the devil is in the interpretation. Stokely Carmichael, okay?

WHITNEY STRUB: Oh, yeah. I think I know where you're going with this.

TOM HAYDEN: Yeah. He said that. He said that after an exhausting meeting, on wine, maybe high, with a group of black and white people layin' out under the stars, laughing. Do you seriously think that he gave that as a speech? No. Did he think he was gonna be quoted for 50 years? No. Even my ex, Casey, who was there, has written extensively about how this is a bum rap. There's other things you might say about Stokely Carmichael, but this is a totally bum rap. At least he said it. We know that he said it. In this case, which is not exactly parallel, there's no evidence one way or the other that it was actually said. 'Cause Carl would maybe know.

WHITNEY STRUB: Right. He didn't really leave papers, either. He—

TOM HAYDEN: No. He didn't say that I said it. He might've said it to someone who said it to someone else. Then it came back and then it crept into my mind and now I'm imaging myself sayin' it. Sorry.

WHITNEY STRUB: No, no. I mean, I don't think—

TOM HAYDEN: Gimme hypnosis.

WHITNEY STRUB: I guess for me, as an historian, I don't think the kind of smoking gun questions are necessarily the crux of the matter. I mean, the reason I think it's a complicated story is—I completely agree. I don't think there was necessarily overt homophobia. I mean, there was from some people. Obviously, the Black Panthers, in—especially in the last '60s, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, I mean, they said "fag" a lot as an insult. Clearly, that's not the dynamic here. I mean, at the same time, I think it's also fair to say that for gay people who were then closeted, they didn't feel safe. I don't think that's the New—it's not a burden that the New Left uniquely carries. It's a burden shared universally by heteronormative *[cross talk 18:01]* society.

TOM HAYDEN: I don't doubt that.

WHITNEY STRUB: In other words, I wanna be clear, I'm certainly not looking to do some kind of hit piece. I mean, I'm interested in a nuanced story of what the closet was like for somebody like Carl Wittman in Newark in the '60s. I guess maybe, to shift it a little, to shift the framework, I mean, could you tell me this? How did he read to the Newark public? Was he discernably gay—

TOM HAYDEN: No. You mean in terms of some stereotype?

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah, yeah. **[18:30]** I mean, did people perceive him—

TOM HAYDEN: No, no. He was the greatest guy. People really liked him. He loved people. He was a very good organizer. He had lot of empathy for people. He had a very methodical sort of—we could say scientific approach to organizing. How many doors did you knock on? How many—

WHITNEY STRUB: Right. I've seen his memos. Yeah.

TOM HAYDEN: Yeah. How many people said "yes" to coming to the meeting? How do you assess the people's leadership potential? Who should chair the

meeting? The ability to do that day in, day out, day in, day out is the hallmark of a great organizer. Parallel to that, he had a unspoken sexual relationship or relationships that I only knew about in the case of Vernon, who is also dead. Some people would call that the closeted life. At the very least, he was disciplined. In his priorities in '63, he was gonna be as close to the Malcolm X approach to the world as possible. Nothing else mattered compared to that. Entering into that and then feeling the experience of being in the closet on the one hand and being pushed back by black nationalism on the other, I mean, I think it brought his fuller identity into expression. I would be interested to know what steps—did he know about the Mattachine Society? I don't know. Somebody might know.

WHITNEY STRUB: I don't know on that, but—

TOM HAYDEN: The history of Mattachine seems more like in LA.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah, but the '60s—

TOM HAYDEN: In the gay underworld, in the gay bar scene, somebody mighta been—'cause those were communist party people who suppressed their gay identity. Then they were kicked outta the party for havin'—being closeted homosexuals and security risks. They said, "What the hell? Now we're coming out." They had the Carl Wittman **[21:00]** organizing, the same organizing, discipline.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah. They were brilliant.

TOM HAYDEN: They're quite a lost part of the history. That's really an interesting group. They lived around here, up in the hills.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah, yeah, up at Silver Lake.

TOM HAYDEN: Silver Lake, exactly.

WHITNEY STRUB: I used to live in the neighborhood, actually.

TOM HAYDEN: Edenville [Edendale]

WHITNEY STRUB: Mm-hmm. Yep. Did you read the Daniel Hurewitz's book about it *[inaudible 21:25]* in Los Angeles?

TOM HAYDON: Wonderful.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah.

TOM HAYDEN: Wonderful.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah, it really is.

TOM HAYDEN: I identified with the Carey McWilliams character, right in the middle of it and having no understanding. "Cross-dressing? Why are we doing this?" There all these people, all gathered in that *[inaudible 21:41]*. I guess everybody, even when they're closeted, finds it important to move into the same communities for protection, identity, collective solidarity, even if it's not spoken.

WHITNEY STRUB: Right. Yeah. No, yeah, it's a fascinating story.

TOM HAYDEN: Yeah, it is. Then there's Carey McWilliams. No, I can't help you, but it's a good *[cross talk 22:07]*—

WHITNEY STRUB: This actually is very helpful.

TOM HAYDEN: It's not a small thing, because historians will go on and on about how the gay liberation movement was a response to the sexism of the SDS male leaders. Then they'll go this guy's quote, which has no sourcing. I become the icon with clay feet or something. Since I care very much about history and legacy, it pisses me off that a historian would make such assertions without evidence. It's like, "is said to have said, but denies it." That would at least be fair.

WHITNEY STRUB: Yeah. I mean, that is not the story I'm interested in telling.

TOM HAYDEN: No. **[23:00]** The general subject is interesting. I don't think of Abbie and Jerry as being homophobic.

WHITNEY STRUB: No, I agree. They used—

TOM HAYDEN: I don’t really understand the category that they were in.

WHITNEY STRUB: They didn't think critically about their use of language. I mean, I would agree. I don't actually think there are—

TOM HAYDEN: When they were in the revolutionary youth culture or alternative culture, drug culture, however it gets framed, what were their attitudes about gay people? They were around them all the time—Allen Ginsberg. They couldn’t be goin' around saying "faggot" to everybody.

WHITNEY STRUB: Well, they did. I mean, that's the—I think that's the tricky thing, right? I mean, I actually agree with you that I don't think they were homophobic in a strict sense. They were very casual about using "faggot" as an insult in a way that I think came from a sort of unquestioned privilege and without thinking through the ramifications.

TOM HAYDEN: When? Did Allen Ginsberg tolerate that?

WHITNEY STRUB: I think he did, honestly.

TOM HAYDEN: No. He got kicked outta Cuba for *[inaudible 24:05]*.

WHITNEY STRUB: Well, yeah. I mean—

TOM HAYDEN: They would've known Allen Ginsberg, who was pro Cuban revolution, got kicked out because of homosexuality. That would've been in '65. Because I am writing a book about Cuba so I know about this stuff. I can't quite grasp how Jerry and Abbie would have—

WHITNEY STRUB: I mean, again—

TOM HAYDEN: Anyway, that's not—

WHITNEY STRUB: I think they didn’t think it through, frankly.

TOM HAYDEN: I'm not a student of that.

WHITNEY STRUB: Because even Jim Fouratt, who was a gay activist at the time, he would make apologetics—I mean, he tried to build bridges and would tell the gay liberation folks, "Look, they don't mean what it sounds like they mean when they use these words." He'd try to do the same thing for the Black Panthers at the time.

TOM HAYDEN: Our prosecutor in the trial, *[cross talk 24:52]*—

WHITNEY STRUB: Right, right—"freaking fag revolutionaries."

TOM HAYDEN: - said that we represented the "freaking fag revolution."

WHITNEY STRUB: Which is the title of a great article about gay liberation.

TOM HAYDEN: I can't imagine Jerry or Abbie using the term in that sense. They mighta used it like black people feel entitled to say "nigger." Calling people "faggots," I'm tellin' ya I don’t remember anyone ever calling anyone a faggot on the left. Did they? Of course. Must've. I don’t remember anyone

ever spitting on a GI. That one, I've pursued forever. It appears that the whole incident—

WHITNEY STRUB: No. That, I agree. Yeah. I think that's a demonstrably false myth.

TOM HAYDEN: Okay. Well, you and I should write a book on memory. The tricks of memory are unbelievable.

WHITNEY STRUB: Oh, yeah. I mean and—

[End of Audio 25:46]