

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Peter Savastano

Interviewer: Timothy Stewart-Winter and Whitney Strub

Date: June 23, 2015

Location: Rutgers University-Newark

T = Timothy Stewart-Winter

W = Whitney Strub

P = Peter Savastano

T = OK, so we are here with Peter Savastano. It is June 23rd, 2015 and we're in Newark. Why don't you tell us a little about yourself?

P = So I'll just give you a little bit on family background. I wish I had more to offer than I do. But because I am sort of first generation Italian American and I was born in 1951, the practice in those days was to try to erase as much of your Italian-ness as possible. So I don't know as much about my family history as I would like to. What I can tell you is that my family came to Newark, settled in Newark, sometime in the late 19th Century, very early 20th century. I'm obviously from an Italian American family. My father's parents were born in Italy. My mother's parents were also born in Italy. Both were arranged marriages. My *paternal* grandparents, both of them, were arranged marriages *too*. We were from Catholic background, but with a little strangeness mixed in. So my father's mother was actually an Italian Jew who converted to Catholicism and for reasons I do not fully understand, my mother's father, who was Italian, was not Catholic. He was Greek Orthodox. We think that may have to do with some of the area of Italy where he was from, which is way down in the south. Right across from the Aegean Sea. So you could see Greece from there. So what the history of all of that is, specifically, I cannot tell you.

My mother's father was a tailor and he actually had a tailor's shop not too far from here. My mother lived just a few blocks from here as a child and my father lived over near St. Lucy's church. In fact, right outside of St. Lucy's church on 8th avenue. It's no longer there. Partly because of 280 and all of that. My father's father was a blacksmith and I don't think my father's mother worked outside the home, which was fairly common in those days.

With regard to my mother's family, something happened, I'm not quite clear what. Supposedly the family lore is that my mother's mother was caught *in flagrante delicto* with another guy and she was then banished from the family. My mother didn't see her for a number of years. So one of the things I'm kind of very aware about is all of this kind of fractured-ness in my family history that certainly made its way into my own childhood in a lot of ways. My father suddenly died in 1958. I was 7 years old. My mother was 3 months pregnant to my only sibling, which is a brother who's 8 years younger than me.

I really grew up in a world that was totally filtered through the lens of being Italian and being Catholic. So much so, that I often joke and say I even believed that the black people living in our

neighborhood, and there were very few of them, were also Italian and Catholic. [laughter] And I also believed that Jesus and Mary and Joseph were also Italian and Catholic and they went to St. Lucy's church every Sunday to receive communion and mass. [laughter]

So that's kind of how simple the world was in which I grew up. It was definitely very homogenous and I think things didn't really start to change until my father died. Then, because my mother was...her work was to be a housewife and a mother, she had no skills. She had no ability to deal with the world, outside world what-so-ever. So she found herself in really difficult straits having a 7 year old child and one on the way. As a result of that, she was really socialized as a woman to believe that it was only through a man that she could have any validity as a person and she could survive. So she spent a lot of those years shortly after my father's death looking for a man and she eventually found one who unfortunately happened to be a very dangerous, low-ranking, very violent Mafioso guy, who spent most of their relationship in prison. But when he wasn't in prison, he was extremely violent, particularly to me who he absolutely loathed and despised, because I exhibited, as I remember overhearing my mother and him talking one day...I was in the other room. I was really young, I must have been about 8 or 9 at the time and I heard my mother say to him, "There is nothing wrong with my son! He's just a little sissified." [laughter] I love that word, "sissified." [laughter]. You know so I think it took me, probably quite a number of years later, to sort of figure out. You know I think originally I thought, as a kid, his hatred of me was just because I was like a millstone around my mother's neck and therefore she wasn't free to go off clubbing with him and trip the life fantastic as he would have liked her to do.

So I'd say my childhood here in Newark was really pretty rough in a lot of ways and that was partly because of the period of time that it was. And if you know anything about Italian culture, in many ways it's like Latin culture, so machismo is the most highest value. It's totally patriarchal, so women and other sexual subalterns are all the property of men to do with as they want. Either for their pleasure or as objects of their anger and scorn. That certainly started to manifest in my own life pretty early on where I was sort of passed around, so to speak, from older guy to older guy. Eventually that blossomed into multiple sexual abuse and incidents of sexual abuse and violation in a lot of ways that took me many, many years into my adult life to sort of make sense of, sort out, come to terms with, so forth and so on. And you know I watch all that we are aware of now in terms of bullying and I realize that in those days what we now think of as bullying was totally accepted and legitimate and every institution I could ever imagine— every social institution, every cultural institution, every religious institution, every political institution totally legitimized and condoned that. Including being in public school in Newark.

I went to Abington Avenue School before I eventually went to Catholic school around 7th grade, but I can remember one of the things we had to do was industrial arts and I hated industrial arts. So the teacher decided that there was obviously something wrong with me, I was effeminate or whatever the case may be and he was going to humiliate me by taking me out of the industrial arts class and putting me in with all the girls in home economics class. He could just arbitrarily decide to do that, and he did, and he did it by announcing it to all of the other boys in the industrial arts class. They all would call me "fairy Mary" and stuff like that. Then I went into the

home economics class, which really upset the teacher in the home economics class, because their strategy was that I would be so humiliated, I would be a good boy and go back to shop class, and I loved baking biscuits, and I was more than happy to stay there! [laughter]

I can remember going home and telling my mother about this. She became enraged and went to the principal's office and yelled and screamed at the principal, who pretty much told my mother it was too bad, they could do whatever they want to do. Now this would have been in you know, the very early...no actually...yeah, it was...

T = You were in public school?

P = ...It was public school in Newark. So it would have been the very early 1960s, just shortly after my father died.

Then I sort of had to navigate, because all of these older guys were sort of having their way with me, word travels fast. So there was really nowhere that I could go in Newark that there wasn't some group of teenage guys on some corner who would call me names publically, humiliate me, but later in the dark of night seek me out. So I just remember my childhood on the streets of Newark as being always having to sort of strategize about where I could go, where it was safe, and so forth and so on. Now I should also say that I had quite a temper as a young person, so I was not beyond snapping and defending myself. There were a few instances where I had reached my saturation point and ended up having some fist fights. Which I always won, much to the humiliation of, you know, the young machos of the Italian American world in those days.

You know a lot of this also seemed to center around...there were these weird rules, I remember, like boys don't dance. If you dance, except for slow dancing, which was really about how to get sex from women. But if you were capable of expressing yourself with that kind of freedom, physically and emotionally, then you were a fag. Right? And so I loved to dance. I still love to dance. So because of that, I started to notice cultural differences, like I began to realize that you were not a fag if you danced in the African American community. Right? So I felt more at home there than I did in my own community. That was kind of the beginning of my, what would in adult years become my life as an anthropologist, so to speak. I suddenly realized that there were other cultures that did things differently and I might more easily find a home there than I did in my own community.

I was also, for reasons I still don't understand to this day, but I was an extremely religious child. And I do not come from a family of...you know any more than Catholics who thought that meant ravioli and manicotti at Easter and struvella and zeppoles at Christmas and seven fishes on Christmas Eve. [laughter] Nobody really went to church. My mother was what was called a "St. Gerard baby," so she sort of carried on this kind of magical relationship with St. Gerard particularly. She had this vow that she kept to St. Gerard all of her life. You know, a lot of it was based on this sort of, what I call the logic of Italian Catholicism, which is quid pro quo...'you do this for me, I'll do that for you. You don't do this for me, I will punish you.' [laughter] Right? So my mother was very motivated by that, but that was about as religious as she got.

I, in the meantime, even you know I would say as young as 3 or 4 years old, would have these incredible dreams. In these dreams would be Jesus, the Virgin Mary, saints, black slaves, Native Americans. I could fly in these dreams. I was taught in these dreams by black slaves in chains. Initiated by Native American medicine men. I had no idea where all this was coming from then and you know I don't still understand it to this day. But there was always this sense, that there was something more than just what presented itself to my senses. That there was this other dimension to life and to my own being that was totally mysterious, that seemed to have a whole different set of rules than the rules of everyday life. That of course has continued to fascinate me and obsess me to this day.

Most of my work, as you know, is around issues of spirituality and religion. In particularly consciousness related stuff—what you think of as paranormal stuff. Why is it that we go into trances, we can go into meditative states, we have these premonitional kinds of experiences? I still have not been able, even with a PHD in this stuff, to make sense out of that. But I do know that as a child it just profoundly, profoundly affected me.

Probably it was one of, I would say, the worst traumatizing shocks of my life to discover, you know, somewhere in my very early adolescence what the Catholic church thought about people that I obviously was one of. Meaning being a homosexual. I mean, because the church was kind of where I found my safety and my refuge so to speak. It was my security. And so to have that sort of crumble before my eyes in that moment was really traumatizing. Probably even more traumatizing than the sexual abuse stuff that had gone on.

And quite ironically, none of my sexual abuse stuff was by priests ever. It was by teachers in elementary school and public school and by friend's fathers and you know, other male adults that were around me, but never by anyone that had any official role in the church. Which I know is kind of shocking given what's gone on with the Catholic church and all the pedophilia scandals that are still going on to this day. But that whole sort of awareness, that "Uh oh, I'm on the outs with everything that really matters to me," or that mattered to me at the time, sort of transported me to this space of being betwixt and between everything. While that was very unsettling and very painful in a lot of ways, it also opened up a world of possibilities to me. I think it was the beginning of my radicalization in a lot of ways. It certainly forced me out of that insolated, isolated, homogeneous Italian Catholic world in which I once lived.

T = Being gay did or being different...

P = Well, realizing that I was around being gay, being on the outs, and also these sort of heterodox or unorthodox nature of these dreams that I would have. You know black slaves and Native Americans are not, were not part of the Catholic world in which I grew up. The Virgin Mary and Jesus and saints in dreams is one thing. And I had no way of even finding something external in my life. I mean certainly as a kid I watched loads of cowboy and Indian movies, but I just don't know about what I think of as the African elements of my spirituality, which I think really propelled me to become an expert in African derived traditions that mixed with Catholicism as an adult and an academic.

W = Can I interject? When did you become aware of sort of homosexuality as a concept and then when did you become aware of the church's response? I mean, what specifically precipitated that?

P = I became aware of homosexuality of a concept and the church's response to it around the same time. Which would have been around 10 or 11 years old. I had my first homosexual experience when I was around 7 and it was with the 18 or 19 year old son of good friends of my mother's who she had grown up with. I remember having that experience and it was like a charge of electricity went through me. First of all because it was so frightening, but it was also so incredibly pleasurable and transporting at the same time. But I had no words for any of that.

It really wasn't until around 10 or 11 when I was also having regular sexual experiences with other boys my own age that we were talking once about intercourse, and this is kind of a funny story. So you know in those days condoms were referred to as rubbers. So this guy, this friend of mine, told me that, "Yeah, you know they use rubbers, men and women! They take this rubber hose and they hook one end of it to the guy's pee-pee and the other end of it they stick in the woman and that's how they have sex!" [laughter] So this was kind of, ya know, sort of news to me! Somehow you know I thought, "Oh so that's what a rubber is! OK, it's a rubber hose!"

Then somehow we got into this discussion about all of this was a sin. What we did together, showing each other our pee-pees, whatever it was we were doing, these things were big sins. I remember when he said that, that same charge of electricity went through me, so to speak, that happened on my first sexual encounter at seven, except the ecstasy and pleasure that went along with it was replaced by this awful dread. Then somehow my mother's boyfriend, the same despicable Mafioso guy, had this like psychiatric book on sexual perversions or something and I found this book and I read about myself in this book and I just remember thinking at the time that I was in such trouble. You know I mean deep, deep, deep doo-doo! [laughter]

T = Was he living with you and your mother?

P = Well, he was, we later found out, my mother died in 2000, so it will be 15 years in less than a month. And he died about a year before and we found out that while he had my mother he also had women all over the country in addition to my mother. So he would travel around, we later learned, from one woman to the other. So there would be periods where he was living with us and then he'd be gone for months. Until eventually he went away to prison for twenty-something years and my mother faithfully wrote to him, sent him food, went to visit him, you know. It wasn't until I was in graduate school in fact, I mean this is so typical of, you can get a sense of what my family was like, so I was in graduate school and I called up my mother one day and said, "Hi Mom, how ya doing?" and she said, "Oh I'm good! Nicky's out of prison and he lives with me! Here say hello to him!" and she handed me the phone! [laughter] I was like "What!?" [laughter] You know...

T = Well...

[laughter]

P = So there he was! Back in my both my life and my mother's life. You know, I was an adult. I went back to graduate school at 45 years of age. So this would have been maybe about 2 years into graduate school, so I was like about 47. As soon as he came out of prison and was with my mother, her life just went down the drain, the tubes again. She started smoking cigarettes again after years of not doing it, drinking, getting into all kinds of trouble with credit cards that he was using and running up debt and everything. So eventually they just sort of killed each other with their bad lifestyle and so forth and so on.

T = Can you tell us So you said your mother didn't go to church often. When she did go, was it St. Lucy's? Is that where you went to church?

P = Yes, always. Always St. Lucy's.

T = Did you go with someone other than her...?

P = I went on my own. We no longer lived in that neighborhood. We moved further up into the North Ward. Into the middle of what, you know, was then much more Italian. Things began to change after 1967. So we no longer lived in what was in those days called "Newark's Little Italy," of which even this neighborhood was sort of a part of at that time. We had moved much more up into the north end of the city, so I would just go to church there. I would do all of this on my own. No one ever told me, you must, it's Sunday you must go to church. I did all of this...

T = Yeah...

P = ...for myself.

T = You liked it!

P = I liked it! You know, for all the reasons that Ellis Hanson writes about, which I, of course, did not know at the time. [laughter] But I mean let's face it, it is all so...so erotically transporting. I mean, have you even been in St. Lucy's church for example?

T = I haven't actually.

P = You really must go there! It is the most ornate Catholic church in Newark. You would think you were in southern Italy somewhere, like Sicily or Sardinia, or something like that! I mean, it's just transporting, just the imagery, the sensuality of it and that was certainly the case, this was all, you know, just around not even the big changes of *Vatican II*, so any Catholic church that you went to, had that capacity to kind of usher you into a world of spiritual sensuality or sensual spirituality. It was just all highly eroticized in every sense of the word and it had this kind of ecstatic quality to it, which just drew me like a magnet.

Occasionally, I would go to the Orthodox church with my grandfather and that was equally as transporting.

T = Where was that?

P = Well, not far from here...do you know Martin Luther King Blvd? Other side of Market Street where St. Benedict's prep is, so right across the street from it was St. *Nicholas Greek*

Orthodox Church. It's gone now. In fact, they merged with an Orthodox church that was in Orange – St. Constantine and Helen. So it's now St. *Nicholas* and Constantine and Helen *Greek* Orthodox Church. It's up in Roseland, NJ. They have a big beautiful church there. But at the time it was not too far. I would occasionally go there with my grandfather and that also had just a profound...I think Felliniesque would probably be the best way to describe it with a little bit of Jodorowsky thrown in. [laughter]

T = Were there other adults besides your mother, after your father passed... your grandfather, what were the other significant adults or, and also, places that you remember going? Besides St. Lucy's, the Orthodox church, school...

P = Yeah, so you know the sad story of my large extended family and my brother who missed out on all of this, because when my father died, my mother was pregnant to him and when she met her boyfriend in 1959, he was only a few months old. Prior to that, we had a large extended Italian family. There were all of these, loads and loads of aunts and uncles, and cousins, and grandparents and all of that. By that time, three of my grandparents were dead. There was only one living, my father's father. When my mother met this Mafioso boyfriend, he essentially drove everyone away from my mother. So we lost all of our family because of that. He threatened people, intimidated people. That's a typical pattern for abusive men. They have to isolate the women and the children that they are going to abuse. That was certainly what he did.

I really only had minimal contact with one aunt and uncle and two cousins. And the reason for that is equally as bizarre. This was my father's one brother who was married to a woman, we never put two and two together, who happened to have the same last name as my mother's boyfriend. When my mother went to introduce her boyfriend to my aunt and uncle, it was in a nightclub, and my aunt said, "Let's go to the lady's room." So my mother and my aunt went to the lady's room and my aunt said to [her], "Louise," my mother's name was Louise, "what are you doing? This guy is my first cousin and he's married and has children. Are you out of your mind?" Right? And my mother was out of her mind, because she chose to ignore that! [laughter]

T = Wow, so they never married?

P = No, never married. No. And so but my aunt and my uncle, for whatever reason, remained connected to us.

So I actually found my refuge. I just remember one of the things my mother told me as a kid is, "All black people were dirty and filthy, you should never go into their houses, you should never eat...you should never touch them." So, you know, all you had to do was tell me a whole long list of "never's" and I was immediately where I was told never to go. So I actually found my refuge, believe it or not, in the "*colored*" families that lived in the neighborhood at the time. I could go there and they would talk to me. They would treat me kindly. We would listen to music together. I was always seeking to be out of my house, because it wasn't safe there. So I was either on the streets of the neighborhood and when I needed to get off the streets there were all of these African American families in the neighborhood where I knew I could go for refuge and safety. That began to introduce me to black culture and all of the wonders and beauties and also the pain and suffering of black culture, which I identified with immensely even though at the

time I didn't know why. Eventually, that would lead to me, even as a high school student, being very active in the civil rights movement.

W = So we are in the mid-1960s now?

P = Yeah, I went to high school from 1966 to 1970, right so Newark was alive with radical everything in those years, my high school years. I mean, it was just everywhere!

T = Where did you go to high school and what were your schools? I know we have Abington and then Catholic school.

P = Yes, I went to Abington Avenue. Well, I started out at Franklin School, which is right over here on Park Avenue, very close to St. Lucy's. There were two public schools, McKinley School which was right next to St. Lucy's, but since where the part of the old First Ward that I lived in was a little further out near where the cathedral was, they built the Cathedral right smack in the middle of Newark's Little Italy, so it took a whole section of that neighborhood and cordoned it off from the heart of the neighborhood which was down around St. Lucy's Church. So because I lived with my mother and father in that part of Newark's Little Italy I had to go to Franklin School, which was down on Park Avenue. I don't know if you know Newark well enough to know this, so there is a part where Park Avenue comes down and with Bloomfield Avenue they filter into Broadway going towards where the Lackawanna Train Station is.

So I went to Franklin School and then we briefly moved to Bloomfield, which is where my father died. We were there for about two years. Came back to Newark. I went to Franklin School again for a while. Then we moved further up into north Newark. I went to Abington Avenue School. Then from there we moved even further up into north Newark, into what was on the outskirts of the Forest Hills section of Newark. So the poor side of the tracks, so to speak, and that was when I went to, for the first time, Catholic elementary school, 7th and 8th grade. I went to Our Lady of Good Counsel and then from there I went to a huge all boys Catholic high school, Essex Catholic High School, which was located where Broadway House is now on Broadway in Newark. It was the old Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company building before they moved here to Broad Street. They are no longer in Newark at all. I went there...

T = But became Essex?

P = Yes, it became Essex Catholic and I went there for freshman year, sophomore year, and junior year. I became really radicalized there, believe it or not, by the Catholic brothers, the Christian Brothers of Ireland who taught us you know and by a lay teacher who I realized only years later who was a wild, radical, flower child hippie. He was eventually fired for being a "pinko Commie pig" in the language of the day.

That summer of 1969, I returned to Essex Catholic for my last year. I had grown a beard and my hair was a little long and the brother said to me, the principal, "You get rid of the beard and the long hair or you're out!"

So I said, "I'm out."

T = Wow.

P = Then I went to Barringer for half a year, where I got into a series of fights and then I went to Vailsburg High school, other side of the city in the West Ward for the last half of my senior year. My mother worked for Westinghouse Corporation, which was right down where the Eerie Lackawanna Train Station is, that lot next to it, empty lot, was Westinghouse and my mother worked there along with my uncle.

T = What did she do?

P = She was just a general...you know, she had no high school diploma, so she was a general factory worker. She worked with, I think, circuit boards or something like that. I'm actually not sure, but you know in those days you could earn a good living and get good benefits even if you didn't have a high school diploma, which she did not.

So anyway, she knew someone who lived in the Vailsburg section and we gave his address and that was what made it possible for me to go to high school there.

T = To get out of Barringer, which you wanted to do?

P = Which I wanted to do, yeah. I will also say, quite bizarrely, that when I spent my last year in public school in Newark, they were reading, for example in English class, stuff that I had read in freshman year in English class. And while all of my years of high school, while all of that was going on, I was bored to death with the curriculum so I was educating myself reading everything you could think of from Nietzsche to Nathan Heard to Eldridge Cleaver to Kafka, Hermann Hesse, James Joyce, Paul Goodman *Growing Up Absurd*, A.S. Neill *Summer Hill* you name it! I was getting this whole kind of self-designed education.

T = Did you get the books from a library?

P = Some of them I would get from the Newark Public Library, which was incredible in those days where I also worked.

T = From the main branch?

P = Yeah, the main branch where I worked as a high school student. It was my first paying job, \$1.10 an hour. I stacked books. And others I would get from a place called "The Paperback Book Stall," which was on Broad Street right at Central Avenue, where Central Avenue...if you were going down Central Avenue from this direction you'd come to Broad Street and if you looked a little to your left about three doors in was the "Paperback Book Stall," which eventually became in the '70s "The Happy Booker" [laughter]

T = Was it a stall?

P = No, I mean, you could get everything there! I remember I got all three volumes of Sartre's Trilogy and, you know, I would carry these books around with me and read them everywhere. As I was telling Whit earlier, one of my most favorite places to come and read was the Robeson Campus Center which it was not called then. And I would either hang out, I would cut school, and hang out there and read all day or I would go to nearby Essex County College, which at the time was down near Penn Station in an old building on Cedar Street. I would go sit in the lobby,

and read books while I waited for my friends who were all Fine Arts majors, you know, doing their sculpture classes and stuff.

I had a group of friends, all of my friends were always older than me. My peers were boring, I just couldn't have conversations with them. I think because of what happened to me as a child. I was hyper-sexualized so just, you know, miles ahead of them with everything. So I educated myself in many ways. I had this, sort of, parallel education to what the Newark school system was offering. I remember being really shocked though, that last year in public school, that they were reading things that in Catholic high school I had read in freshman year.

And then I also had, in Catholic high school, this hippie teacher which was eventually fired and he would turn me on to books. Tell me what to read all the time and I read everything he told me to read. Emma Goldman! [laughter] You know, who was reading Emma Goldman in like 1966-67 as a freshman in Catholic high school?! I mean, quite ironically I started reading Thomas Merton in the 7th grade. [laughter]

W = I've got like a million follow up questions from all of this! [laughter] I'll try to streamline it though.

P = No problem!

W = So during all of this, say high school, let's just bracket it as high school, were you aware of gay politics at all? Like the homophile movement, anything like that?

P = No. Not in the least.

W = And your high school years also coincided precisely with the shift from white radicals from S.D.S. and the Newark Community Union Project into the sort of black power politics. How about that? I mean, were you aware of or engaged with either of those or that transition?

P = Very aware of it.

W = So did you participate in any of that?

P = I did, in very indirect ways, I mean, remember I was a minor. So you know, one of the ways that I did do that though, was I would often come down here. I mean Rutgers would have these huge demonstrations over in Military Park there. So I would go to these "be-ins," these all day moratoriums, some of them were about race issues, most of them were about anti-Vietnam stuff. And I would go to all of them, including getting tear-gassed by the police! And I was reading all the literature. I remember I subscribed, even in high school, to *Ramparts* magazine where I would get so much stuff, it was just incredible! I don't think, even though I was probably very intellectually precocious, I think there were limits as to just how much I understood what the issues were. Nevertheless I read all of those books and I would often find myself among the few white people in these rap sessions that they used to have at Essex County College and here at Rutgers in Newark. And I would go to these rap sessions and they would often be followed by these incredible jazz concerts that would take place in the student center. So I was very much aware of it, absolutely.

W = What was your sense of Leroi Jones, who then becomes Amiri Baraka, at the time?

P = Well, I liked him immensely. I became [saddened and upset; PS edit] in later years realizing the nature of his relationship with Allen Ginsberg and just how badly homophobic he was. But, for example, shortly after the rebellion/uprising/riots, there was a move to build apartments for African Americans called “Kawaida Towers,” in the North Ward where I came from and I showed up to those demonstrations in support of it every time. I really experienced a lot of pain and suffering from my own community because of that. I was being called “n-lover” and “race traitor” and really getting beaten up for that kind of stuff. So I was very aware of him and I was in awe of him. You know, I was absolutely in awe of him.

It wasn't until many, many years later, and actually even in graduate school, when because of all the work I did with the Newark Project, I started to inform myself so much more about Newark's history that I realized that somebody whose friend I was, was my enemy. [laughter]

But I have to say about all of that. This is kind of all very convoluted and it's convoluted for this reason. And this I think is about empathy for oppression. I could not articulate any of this at the time, but I think that because of my own personal suffering, and because there was not yet a homophile movement in the way that we would come to understand it as of 1969, even though there was and I knew so little about it. Even though I was actually in the midst of it, I was unable to name it what it was. So my empathy, my sympathy, was for anyone who was suffering, for whatever reason. Whether it was the color of your skin, whatever the clothes you wore, your religion, whatever the case may be, because of my own suffering. But none of that was sorted out at the time, it was all romanticized and idealized in a lot of ways and it wasn't until many years later, when I could sort out the issues, that I could see that...I'm sure there would be those African American thinkers who would take me to task for this, but that people whose friends I were, were not my friends in return. You know, I can actually remember in graduate school bringing this up. One of my professors, Tracey West, who you probably met...

W = Oh, yeah. Yeah I did.

P = I took a course on race and racism with her. I remember bringing this up and she said to me, “Oh so because all of your compassion for us and all, we're supposed to just be grateful for your largess?”

You know that was a real moment of awakening with just how romanticized and simplistic, even though it was rooted in empathy, that kind of thinking was politically.

W = Right.

P = And I mean I'm very grateful to her for helping me think more sophisticatedly and with more nuance about the differences between sexuality and gender issues and race issues, but without denying the intersectionality of all of it. But at the time, I didn't understand any of that. I was just operating on pure emotion and very limited thinking, even though I was probably miles ahead of my peers, certainly in the white Italian-American community of Newark.

W = Right. Can I have one more and then I'll cede the floor to you. Although the Towers actually, I should mention to you, Baraka took film of those protests, 8 and 16mm, and it's in his papers at Columbia, but they won't let you watch it unless they digitize it, which is super expensive. I'm trying to get them to digitize it. I think it's got to be fascinating footage, so maybe you will pop up in it.

P = Maybe!

W = The other follow up I was going to ask him and then I'll let Tim ask his, just about places in Newark, you have alluded to this sort of places where you kind of hung out, or felt safe, or found community. Can you speak a little more about your experiences of Newark beyond the neighborhood?

P = So the big place to go of course was downtown Newark, right? This was prior to the age of shopping malls and all of those things. So downtown Newark was really the only place where everybody and anybody could go to shop, to experience entertainment and culture. And in those days, because I was young and full of energy, we just all walked into downtown Newark. There were cafes to go to right down here on...what's this street here...the one if you cut through...

W = New?

P = New Street! So right on New St., the block between Halsey and Washington, was a little café called "Jolly Dolly's Café." It was a coffee house and the woman who owned the place, Jolly Dolly [...]

So we had that and you know, our other favorite thing to do, I mean they were really very simple things, we used to love to walk down from north Newark, me and my sort of hippie friends in those days, and we would go to Dunkin Donuts to get a glazed twist. [laughter] Then you could just wander around in the department stores, hang out in Military Park, go to Chock Full o'Nuts, which is no longer...actually Chock Full o'Nuts was kind of over where you live now, on Broad St right at Raymond Blvd. And there were loads and loads of book stores and record stores. So you could spend a whole day, sitting in the stacks of those bookstores, reading, looking through paperbacks, and then doing the same thing in the record stores. So there was just a world of things to do. There were head shops and hippie clothing shops. The streets of Newark were always crowded.

I can actually remember at Christmas time, a little younger than this, taking my little brother at 11 o'clock at night and getting on the bus to come down Christmas shopping, because as it got closer to Christmas the stores would remain open until midnight and one in the morning. And they were packed with people! And as a little kid you were safe! No one was...you were just safe! And it was exciting! You didn't have to go to New York, right? And then there was this sort of whole...not underground world...but substratum of house parties that you could dance at. I was friends with men and women who belonged to these black fraternities and sororities. They would have these dances in various places in Newark. I would go to them with my friends and dance our brains out. So there was a lot to do. A lot to do.

W = Wow, yeah that's great.

P = Then I would also wander over to the south end of Newark, to the Weequahic section. I knew people all over the place. So I would just take buses to parties...to hang out with people. All those things. It was just a different world. I'm sure there are versions of these things that go on in Newark even to this day, but it was just a different world then, because all of the things, the entertainment, the shopping, had not been siphoned off by malls. The first mall to be built was the Willowbrook Mall and I can remember then even beginning to notice a change.

T = When was that? Do you remember?

P = I think that was very late '60s?

T = What were some of the stores you remember the best or you liked going to the best? Both department stores, bookstores, and record stores.

P = Well, all the department stores. That would have been at the time it was Bambergers, which then became Macy's, Hahne's and Company, Kresge's, Klein's, Bond's Clothes for Men, *Branford* Hats, which I think believe it or not is still there, Wiss Jewelers, and then there was the Paperback Book Stall, there was Park Records, Broad Street Records, Raymond Blvd Records...there was Mr. Dingle the Peanut Man, [laughter] which was down over on Park Place here on the block where the Robert Treat Hotel is. It was in the middle of the block, where the public service building is now. That used to be the old Public Service Gas and Electric building. There was this Mr. Dingle. You could go there and you could get roasted peanuts, you could buy crystallized sugar-coated orange peels, lemon peels, ginger rye, caramelized ginger, all of these sort of things. [laughter] There was Schrafft's where you could go and buy candy. There was McCrory's, Woolworths...

W = I've got to ask a tangent question, T M Ward Coffee, do you remember this?

P = Very well!

W = I just discovered it!

P = Oh, very well!

W = Was it always in the same place down Broad Street?

P = Yes, that's it!

W = Established 1869!

P = Yes.

T = Wow!

W = Yeah, it's amazing!

P = Yeah, I know, and that was also somewhere to go. I mean, it was kind of novel, because you could actually get coffee in bags that was different from what you would get in the supermarket.

There was also, I mean, I never went in, but I used to look in the window, there was Griffith's Piano Company. The Griffith's Building is still standing. It's one of those gorgeous art deco buildings like the old New Jersey Bell Telephone building that I think is now Verizon...still Verizon offices. So yeah, there were all those kinds of places.

There was J's, which was this African American restaurant that I used to go to all the time and get peach cobbler. [laughter]

T = During this period, can you talk about...did you know people that you knew were gay men? Did you think of yourself as gay, or did you think of gay sex as something you did, but not...what did it mean to you?

P = So there were other boys that I went to school with who I knew were like me, whatever that means. I don't think I had...I mean, I did have words for it, but they weren't "gay." It was usually the words I was called, which was "fairy Mary," "sissy," "queer," "faggot." There was a song, that, for example, in my case wherever I would go, the guys would sing this song when I would pass,

[Singing] "*Oh Sweet Pete, won't you eat my meat? Won't you, won't you, won't you eat my meat?*"

So they had other songs for these other guys that I went to school with who were like me.

T = This was high school? Elementary school?

P = This would have been elementary school into high school. And I remember there was always this, sort of very uncomfortable, nauseating feeling I would get when I would be with them or see them, because they were reflecting back to me, in hindsight, who I was in the eyes of society.

Also my mother had a cousin who would babysit for me sometimes. Who was also, I realize years later, gay. You know usually older male cousins who babysit for you don't take down your mother's sheers off the window, curtain rods, and wrap them around themselves and dance with them flowing in the air! [laughter] So I always had this sense that there were others who were like me, but it brought this feeling of nausea and disgust along with me.

This was complicated by the fact that all through high school I had a girlfriend, who I was eventually going to get married to. And we are still friends to this day as a matter of fact. Essentially what happened was, when I did begin to come out, which was my last year of high school, so Stonewall had just happened. She said to me at the time, "Well you know it doesn't matter! We'll just get married!" [laughter]

And I remember saying to her, "I don't think that's a good idea, because you're eventually going to want children and I don't. So I think you need to find one of our other friends to marry."

And she did! She found another guy that we grew up with. And she married him and has two grown sons who are married and have their own children now. She and I and him we're still good friends. I see them very regularly.

So I was still operating at the time on the assumption, as probably most of us were, that you're supposed to do what society expects of you. Right? I will say this much though, it was probably around freshman year of high school that I actually fell in love with another guy for the first time. Who I had an ongoing sexual relationship with. But I didn't even know enough to define it as love, I just knew that it was so powerful.

T = Did he go to your high school?

P = Yes, he lived in my neighborhood. Also at the time, on my own initiative, I went to therapy to make myself be straight. So my mother didn't send me! This was all my own idea. I went to the Mount Carmel Guild. In fact, the building where I went to therapy is that beautiful brownstone on the corner of Washington Street and Central Avenue. So you know where the parking lot of the Museum is?

W = Yeah...

P = Right across the street from it on the corner was this beautiful brownstone. It's been somewhat destroyed now, rather than restored. But that's where I would go to therapy.

It was actually in therapy that the therapist said to me, which I could not accept at the time, "Why don't you just embrace and accept yourself and be happy?"

T = This is in the late sixties?

P = Yes.

T = Wow.

P = I suspect that he was one of us, years later! [laughter] In retrospect, you know?

T = Did you want to be straight...was that connected to thinking you were going to marry this girlfriend?

P = No, I wanted to be straight, because I did not want people singing songs to me like, "Oh *sweet Pete*, won't you eat my meat?" and calling me "faggot" and I didn't want to have to deal with am I going to fight or get beat up every corner that I turn? I didn't want any of those things.

T = So it was more about protecting yourself from harassment.

P = Yes, I wanted it all to go away. I wanted it all to go away and I wanted to be able to go to church and not think I was going to go to hell.

Now I should also say, at the same time that all this was going on around the church stuff, I was reading Buddhism and Hinduism and Alan Watts and taking the train over to the East Village and following gurus with another girl that I was simultaneously sort of dating! I mean, you know, that player stuff about straight guys somehow made its way into my budding gay consciousness even in spite of all that. I was beginning to explore the occult, tarot cards, astrology. You know, all of which books I could readily get in Newark at the Paperback Book Stall or the many book stores that were in Newark at the time.

T = Do you remember Vatican II being talked about...controversial?

P = Well I remember the changes. I remember suddenly the mass went from Latin, with the priest not facing us, to the priest facing us, with parts of the mass in Latin and parts of it in English. Then no more Latin totally...English. This was the period where the Catholic Left was in its ascendancy. I was greatly influenced by that.

I should also say that during this period, I began to go, like after 1969, I would go to dances at the Gay Activist Alliance in NYC. And I remember going to those dances and loving the dancing part, but being horrified by the one night stand stuff and thinking to myself, "If this is what my life is going to be, I don't want it." And so I would have these radical conversions to Catholicism and go back in the closet and enter monasteries. I went and lived at the Catholic Worker with Dorothy Day. [chuckles] I belonged to this group of religious brothers who followed this spirituality where you would live among the poorest of the poor totally hidden as a Catholic contemplative and as part of that I worked out of the Catholic Worker. So I had this horrible, sort of torturous, back and forth between, "Hey, I'm gay!" to "Oh God, I don't want to be gay! I want God!" and you know it took me well into my thirties to work all that out! I mean, *well* into my thirties! [laughter] And I'm sure I'm still working it out to this day!

W = I am lost on chronology a little. Where does *Disc-O-Teen* come in, because I really want to hear about that! [chuckles]

P = So *Disc-O-Teen* comes in...in high school, toward the end of high school. So the last two years... '68 through '70.

W = Tell us a little about that, because that is fascinating topic.

P = So I used to watch *Disc-O-Teen* on TV and through friends of mine that I had grown up with, these two girls. They were hippies. They are both probably very straight, conservative somewhere now! [laughter] As was the case with many of my hippie friends who swore they'd never go back to the Catholic Church. As soon as they got married and had kids they were all baptized *and sending their children to catechism!*

But anyway it was through them. They had met some kids from Staten Island who were regulars on *Disc-O-Teen* and in those days you could take a guest with you. So I somehow become the guest of one of them and of course it was dancing and I love dancing. Gradually over time I became a regular. So I had my own pass and I could bring my own guests. And I would do that. I would bring all of my friends.

I didn't know this at the time. Once again, it was always the problem of knowing, but not having the language to articulate what you know. So I remember encountering a number those boys, like in school, that seemed to be just like me who had found a place where you could freely dance and not be called a fag. Right? So I sort of knew, without knowing, that there was this kind of gay sort of subculture there.

T = So for those who don't know anything about it, *Disc-O-Teen* was a TV show.

P = It was a TV show hosted by John Zacherle, who I think is still alive [note: he died at 98 in 2016]. He is probably very old now. At that time, Channel 47 was out of what is now Symphony Hall in Newark. It used to be the Mosque Theater in those days. I was still in Catholic high school in the beginning of it. Actually it was earlier, it was sophomore year, because I was in Catholic high school still for two years. This went on for about three years. Every day I would go home from school, I would get out at 2:30, I would go home watch *Dark Shadows* and then get on the 27 bus and take it down Broad Street to the Mosque Theater and get on line and wait to go dance at *Disc-O-Teen*. And you know, it was two hours, something like that. And you know, people would watch you on TV...

T = It was live?

P = It was live.

T = And what exactly happened?

P = So there would be Zacherle dressed in his strange Dracula-like makeup and with his long tails and black coat and everything...

T = Of course! [laughter]

P = And there would be guests, famous guests! The Box Tops...

W = Yeah, that's the footage on YouTube.

P = That's the only bit of footage that survived.

W = Yeah, that's too bad. I was going to ask you about that.

P = It is so sad that all of that footage is gone. But it was the practice in those days to erase and re-record.

T = It is a shocking amount of TV is gone...

P = A shocking amount and pretty much all of *Disc-O-Teen* is gone. You know, much to my grief.

So it would sort of operate like *American Bandstand* for example or *Soul Train*. There would be boxes...the regular dancers, of which I was one, you could stand up on a box, so I could be like a go-go boy, you know, in my fantasy of fantasy. [chuckles] And there would just be this incredible mixture of people. What I didn't realize, I'd actually be dancing sometimes on these boxes with these women, who were actually dancing in these girlie clubs in NYC in Times Square and 42nd Street. I mean, these incredibly beautiful women. What was I thinking? I was thinking they were other teenagers! And you know they were at least in their twenties, but in my naiveté...but there'd just be all of this dancing and then there'd be an act and Zacherle would have all of his running commentary. He would come around and talk to people and ask, "What's your name?"

T = And the act would be broadcast also?

P = All of it.

T = So there would be live music and recorded music....

P = There would be live music, recorded music, dancing...

T = Were there commercial breaks?

P = No commercial breaks, because it was...

T = Was there a sponsor?

P = I don't remember any of that, but I'm trying to remember...there was like, the regular network TV, and then there was these other sort of alternative channels, and there was a word for it in those days that I can't think of right now...closed circuit? Maybe that was it. There were three or four channels of which Channel 47 was one and it had not yet become essentially Latino TV channel that it later became and I think probably still is now.

So this was a whole source of connection and socializing. And it was actually out of that that I discovered the PATH trains, which were then called "the tubes," and I would get on the PATH trains and go to NYC. This was at the time where discotheques, not disco gay clubs as we would know in the early and mid-70s in NYC in Greenwich Village, but there was all these discotheques—Clay Coles Discotheque...The Cheetah Club. I would go with my friends, African American, white, men, women, gay, straight, though those of us who were gay were certainly not identifying ourselves like that at the time. Through this disco teen group I began to explore the wonders of NYC in a way I had never before. So there was this kind of cross pollination that always went on between NYC and Newark, Newark and NYC.

T = Were those discotheques you mentioned, Clay Coles, The Cheetah...

P= All in NYC.

T = In NYC. Gotcha.

P = All in NY. Eventually a Clay Coles Discotheque opened up on the other side of the Mosque Theater where *Disc-O-Teen* was, but I think it was very short lived. It was very short lived.

T = And if this began your sophomore year, that was...

P = That would have been '67, because I was in sophomore year fall of '67 and it would have ended in spring of '68, summer of '68.

T = This was right after the riots...the uprising.

P = Yes, right after. Actually...yes, it was right after, because it was from my freshman year to sophomore year that the riots/uprising happened. I was in summer school, as a matter of fact, at Essex Catholic and we couldn't go, because the rumors as opposed to the reality was there was black snipers on every roof you could think of. [chuckles]

W = Now this is from the Sanctuary Panel [*held at Rutgers in 2014*] you had discussed, and I'm not sure where this fits in, right now I feel like we are hovering around 1969-1970, so if this is out of chronology, we can save it. But you had talked about the drag dances in downtown Newark. Was that this period or later?

P = No, that was around this period. So here's what I can tell you. Well first of all, I began experimenting with psychedelics and things like that in about the 8th grade. So I would have been about 12...11 or 12.

T = At Jolly Dolly's?

P = No, just through friends. It turns out that there was this black Richie Havens kind of guy who had an apartment in the area of Newark where I lived in at the time. A friend of mine, a white girl I hung out with, took me to his apartment. And I remember Jimmy Hendrix first album with "Purple Haze" on it was playing on the record player and I was given pot to smoke. And so I did.

So somehow through this group of people I ended up in this place in Newark that was kind of like a factory and it was two o'clock in the morning and there was this incredible dance going on there with all these beautifully dressed women, or so I thought at the time. I was among the few white people there, maybe there was four of us. One of them was my childhood friend Joseph and this girl, and this Richie Havens-like guy with the pot. And I only realized shortly after when someone told me that most of those women were not women! They were men dressed as women. And somehow over that period of time, which I'd say was about a year or so, I ended up in about five or six of these, what I now know, was a kind of moving party.

Now I used to think...somehow I got all the facts confused, and this was all a figment of my crazy imagination until I recently, just before that panel in October, I had lunch with a friend of mine, an old friend of mine, and I was saying I was going on this panel, and I didn't know him at the time that I was going to these things and he's not gay, and he proceeded to tell me the same story! That *he* ended up in these places. And I thought, "Oh, I didn't make this up! It's real!"

W = So it sounds like details are fuzzy, but do you remember the geography?

P = I do. So one of them was somewhere down University Street over where The Goodwill Hope and Rescue Mission was and all of these meat...

T = Up towards Broad Street Station.

P = Yeah. That's the old Eerie Lackawanna. So going up towards there, there were all of these meat packing things and these little side streets. And the other one I remember, which doesn't make any sense to me now, but here's what I remember. So where Macy's was, so corner of Halsey and Market Street, right across from Macy's was a place called DMI Drafting Supplies, it was an art supply store and I remember going to one of these happenings in this huge empty loft dance studio across from Macy's above from DMI.

Then I remember another one on Branford Place also above...I don't know, I think it was some kind of...you know the hall that of one of these fraternal organizations, not the Knights of Columbus, but you know some version of that...The Shriners...something like that and one of

them was there. That's what I remember. And one more sort of down toward the Ironbound, it was on the other side of Penn Station, but in the part of Ironbound that was closest to the river.

T = And what year was this again?

P = This would have been '67, '68?

T = And these were late at night?

P = Very late at night. I mean like 2 o'clock in the morning.

T = Would you pay something at the door?

P = I don't remember! I don't remember any of that. I just remember dancing! [laughter] Maybe somebody was taking care of the logistics! I was never a logistics guy, at least not in those days! [laughter]

But what I do remember is just feeling incredible freedom, while also being sort of freaked out by it at the same time being irresistibly drawn to it like a moth to fire. [chuckles]

W = Do you get a sense of...so the black drag queens or maybe transsexuals at the time...were they coming from Newark?

P = I presumed it, but I think in those days with few exceptions, I presumed most things were coming from Newark. [laughter] Until I began to explore NYC and then I realized it was a lot more complex than that.

W = Is your reading of this, that it points to some kind of organized subculture?

P = Oh, definitely. And I know that's the case anyway, because when I was in graduate school I interviewed quite a few white gay men who were born around 1938 or '39 and I remember one of them showing me photos of these incredible drag shows that took place in the Robert Treat Hotel. So there was definitely...I mean I think I was too young to be part of it. He was sort of able to describe for me what 1950s gay Newark was like. And that was actually, *during those* interviews with one or two men, that got me started on that paper that I wrote to want to dig into this more. You know I read Luc Sante at the time and I was putting all these different pieces of the puzzle together and I became obsessed with this. I was in all these...the Newark Museum, the Newark Public Library, anywhere I could find out anything! I just remember seeing these pictures and thinking this couldn't have all just spontaneously have sprung up in the 1960s, there had to be something in place beforehand. I finally acknowledged, that even though this would not be the terminology and their identities would have been constructed differently, that people with same sex desire have been around for as long as humanity has, so how could that not be the case in Newark? Right? There had to be something there and I was determined, even if I only scratched the surface, which was really all that it was, to uncover some of it. But it was those interviews with those two men and the pictures that they showed me that I realized that there was definitely...and I was probably in on the tail-end of it before the sort of gay liberation Stonewall, variation on a theme, happened.

W = Did any of those photos wind up in the Newark Project Archives?

P = No, I returned them to him.

T = Do you remember who it was?

P = Yes, I do. Very well. And he left the area. He was once a very good friend of mine. We've been out of touch for many years. He moved to Florida. He's got to be probably in his late '70s, early '80s, now. But I have the transcriptions of the interview still to this day.

T = Wow.

P = He described to me cruise areas, sexual cruising areas in Newark. One of the big ones being around where NJ Bell, Bell telephone, was.

T = Where was that?

P = So Broad Street, corner of Broad Street where...so I'm trying to think...So if you go down Central Avenue, once you see Central Avenue, you see the Petty Memorial Baptist Church and if you go to the left on the next corner over is that huge beautiful deco building, which is now Verizon. It used to be Ma Bell, NJ Bell Telephone's headquarters.

T = And in that intersection was cruising?

P = You would stand like you were waiting for a bus and there would be guys driving around in cars. Eventually you figured out that it would be better to stand on the side street off of Broad Street than on Broad Street like you were waiting for the bus. But that was a big cruise area there.

And you know the fairy loop in Branch Brook Park was another big cruise area. There were just all these different places.

T = Did you cruise in these places?

P = All young men *did* with hormones out of control...young gay men with hormones out of control. And also in those days, that was the only way you could possibly do it. Right? There was at least nowhere at the time that I knew of that you could legitimately go. I think Murphy's probably was there, but that was something that I didn't discover until I was legal age to drink.

T = The fairy loop in Branch Brook Park, tell us about that.

P = So the fairy loop in Branch Brook Park is a part of Branch Brook Park that runs from Bloomfield Avenue up...there's a whole sort of circular part of Branch Brook Park, that runs from Bloomfield Avenue out to Heller Parkway. But in the middle of it, is a bridge that you could cross over from one side of that large circle to the other side. So from that bridge, which is roughly Davenport Avenue in Newark out to Ballantine Parkway in Forest Hills where the Ballantine Gates are. So from that part down to Bloomfield Avenue was the fairy loop.

In later years, in post-Stonewall years, there would be all these benches. And all the gay guys would hang out there together and talk and laugh and stuff. But also there were loads of woods so loads of opportunities for outdoor sex. And there would be loads of guys driving around.

Now I also have to say that the dynamic was a very different dynamic. I don't know if this has particularly to do with Newark. This is just a theory of mine and I could be totally off. But I think in ethnic communities particularly sexuality gets conflated with gender. So that's what creates the whole sort of rough trade phenomenon. So there is this idea that there is real men and they're straight and if you are not one of those then you're really a woman somehow and you assume that kind of role. So the fairy loop in those days consisted of you know, gay guys servicing straight guys who were trying to get from those gay guys what their girlfriends wouldn't give them. Right? Or how are they going to work out that there are all these restrictions on their sexuality that straight society imposes. You know, you have to marry a woman to get sex ...and so how are they going to navigate that and get their needs met. So all of this in those days was based on that dynamic.

T = And the straight guys would be in cars?

P = In cars or, you know, walking in the woods.

T = And was this a multi-racial scene?

P = Oh yes. Multi-racial. It was more than multi-racial. So, it was black, white, and brown. This was also a period of time where there were a number of Latinos from the Caribbean moving into Newark. A huge influx of Cubans. You know this was would have been just right after the Cuban Revolution. So a huge influx of Cubans...and still to this day there is a huge Cuban presence up in the North Ward. In fact, it's how I learned to speak Spanish fluently living in that neighborhood. So there was that and then more Puerto Ricans coming in. That was probably the predominant Latino population at the time. So it was black, brown, and white.

W = Is that the same place where DeFarra Gaymon was shot in 2010 [*and killed by police*] or is that elsewhere in Branch Brook Park?

P = I think it is the same place.

W = Okay, because I was never sure exactly where that happened.

P = Yeah, but I mean that is all totally changed now. In fact I drove through there to come here today, because it is the quickest way through. I noticed now that in a way that there was not then, all of the woods are totally cleaned up and there are signs now that say "Police patrol here regularly" as a way of, kind of...I mean, and I don't actually know what goes on there.

W = Yeah, I've wondered. I mean clearly the geography has changed, because I have walked through Branch Brook Park trying to figure out where anybody would do anything today. [chuckles] It has clearly been restructured with an aim toward visibility and transparency.

P = Yeah, totally, totally. Which was not the case in those days. And then the other thing is, one of the things that emerged out of that was the hustler phenomenon. So there would be, for example, all of these absolutely gorgeous men with no shirts on posing as though they were out jogging. But everyone knew that...

T = In the park?

P = In the park, right...or posing as doing exercise. Which they were! Maybe they were trying to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. [chuckles] But everyone, you sort of knew who the hustlers were and what was that going to involve and all of those kinds of things. I sort of remember that as being a really kind of painful period of my own life, because I was kind of, sort of, always horrified by it... and the fact that I sort of felt forced into this culture that was opposed to every fiber of my being at the time and was also in many ways my own sexual shadow. I just remember it being a painful period and having real feelings of isolation and desolation and desperation. I mean it was rough.

T = Was there a heterosexual cruising scene or sex work in the same spaces or no?

P = Well I don't know that there was sex work, but let's face it, every space is a heterosexual space. Right? So you could be a guy and a girl making out in a car, steaming up the windows, and the cops would just drive by, because that's normal and that's what heterosexuals do.

T = And that was popular?

P = Sure. Absolutely. I mean parks were places where you went to make out. I mean here's where the sodomy laws were unfairly applied. If it was two guys, then forget it right? I mean this is always the problem. I can remember years back where straight people would say, "Oh I don't care if you're gay. Why do you have to flaunt it?"

And I would say, "But you're flaunting your sexuality with every breath you take! You've got a wedding ring on, you're walking with your baby carriage with your kid in it, and the little wife on your arm, and you're flaunting your family's pictures in my face! You're advertising your heterosexuality constantly! Why are you doing that and when I do it, I'm flaunting?"

So that same dynamic was at work in the fairy loop. Right? The fairy loop was the fairy loop inside the pervasive everywhere present straight loop of everything! [laughter]

W = We're at sort of a pivot point, you're done with high school, Stonewall just happened, we are entering the '70s. Can you describe that transformative moment? Did Stonewall register with you?

P = Oh yeah, it registered big time. Part of it was really through my childhood friend Joseph, who was also gay and who I'm still friends with to this day. Who was so much more sophisticated than I was ever going to be! He was the first to go over to these Gay Activist Alliance meetings in the old GAA Firehouse on Wooster Street and he brought me with him.

I should back up for a minute. My first exposure to all of this, after Stonewall, was after being in a Catholic religious order. What always happened to me in every Catholic religious order I joined, there would be another guy there that I would fall madly in love with. I would go and tell him that I loved him. And even though he was gay, which was 9 time out of 10 the case, he would tell me he wasn't gay and I should leave. And so I would leave.

So the last time that this ever happened was very early in the 1970s and I found myself back in my mother's kitchen in Newark after yet another failed attempt to be a Catholic monk or friar or whatever the case may be. And my whole life was just falling apart around me. And my

childhood friend Joseph said to me, “I want you to come with me to this gay consciousness raising group that is meeting in the basement of this bar on 4th Street or 5th Street in Newark called “The Other World.”

W = So wait this is 1970?

P = This would have been about 1970-71...something like that.

T = So Joseph...you knew that the other was gay?

P = Well he was one of those boys that I went to Catholic grammar school, so I met him in the 7th grade, who I could tell was just like me. So I scorned him. And he was just the most friendly, kind, supportive guy and I just did not want to be associated with him, because he was effeminate. As if I wasn't! [laughter]

Eventually, because we both fell in love with the same guy, we decided, “Screw this jerk! Let's be friends!” The guy went off and married a woman and had a girlfriend ...So here I was, my life had fallen apart, collapsed around me once again, and I was in despair and he took me to this meeting. Where little did I know, I would meet the first guy that I would have a legitimate...you know in as much as one could be legitimate in the early 1970s, but it was a reciprocal love relationship. And through that, the next step was to go to these dances at the GAA Firehouse.

T = Can you tell us a little more about The Other World and about the meeting?

P = So The Other World was like most gay bars were in those days...

T = Had you been to a gay bar before?

P = Never.

T = This was your first gay bar?

P = Actually, no. I had been to one gay bar before. It was in NYC. It was Julius's. Here's what I remember about that. I remember being so scared to go in. It was with my friend Joseph. That when we went in...I actually, I mean talk about the power of the body to symbolizes people's state of being...so I went in like this, like I was about to jump dive into a pool and I didn't want any water to get into my nose, so I held my nose and jumped! And I went into this bar with my friend Joseph and this was around the time that I had already seen the movie *The Boys in the Band*, which really horrified me! [laughter] You know my life was going to be these catty parties with somebody saying, “Well Harold! The bills are paid for, the makeup's paid for!” and going to 5:30 mass at St. Malachy's, because I'm a tortured, self-hating homosexual. I thought, “Nooo!! This is not going to be Peter Savastano!! That is not going to happen!!” [laughter]

So I held my nose and dove into Julius's. I met a guy there, who I went off and had a sexual encounter with and I was so horrified by it that I came home and had another conversion experience back to the Catholic Church. And this led to me going back into religious life. And then it was, you know, coming out again with the same pattern happening that I went to The Other World. Which was probably the first gay bar I ever went to in Newark.

T = Had Joseph had been there before?

P = Yes, not only had he been there before, he was the freaking ring leader of this gay consciousness group! [laughter] I mean this was my friend who I had gone through civil rights activism with. He was right by my side for all of these hippie flower power things towards the end of the '60s. He was one of the people with me when I found myself at these strange dances in Newark at two in the morning. You know, he was right there with me.

What I remember about gay bars in those days that I didn't like was the center of it all was drag. I don't know why this is the case even though I could say there are probably parts of me that you could traditionally say are woman-like or whatever. I just was never one of these gay people who had any interest in changing my gender presentation. The idea of makeup and wigs...and this may just be because my mother was the stereotypical Italian American dyed red flame big hair, hairspray, heavy makeup woman.

I just thought, "I ain't going through all that for nobody! Sorry!" [laughter] You want to stand in front of a mirror for hours every day, I'm happy just to be me in my jeans and my sandals and you know, whatever the case may be. I just never had a gender thing. My sexual identity never somehow mixed with that kind of gender identity.

T = So there was drag at The Other World?

P = Yeah, everything was always centered around drag and camp.

T = Even though you went for this meeting?

P = Even though I went for...the meeting was in the basement. So there wasn't drag and camp going there. And there were also straight people at these meetings, who were, even in those days, allies so to speak. That was different. That was people singing protest songs. It was much more, even though it was the early '70s, it was still the '60s model. That I could jive with.

W = What was the name of the group again?

P = It didn't have a name at the time, eventually it became the Organization for Gay Awareness and it moved its meeting place from The Other World to St. George's Episcopal Church in Maplewood, NJ.

Now getting that space was an adventure in and of itself. It meant that we had to go before the church vestry at the time and everyone must have been reading Freud on that church vestry. [chuckles] So there we are, three or four of us. They know we're gay, they know we are this consciousness group.

What are the questions that this vestry asks us?

"Did you love your mother?" [laughter]

"Did your mother love you?"

"Were you overly attached to your mother?"

I mean this was Freud!! [laughter]

So we answered all those questions and somehow we either loved our mothers enough or sufficiently not enough that they said, “Yes!”

And then we met there for years afterwards. Until, I think it disbanded in the maybe very late 1980s. So it met there for many, many years. I was not active. I had gone on to many other things since then.

T = So you went more than once to this meeting in the basement of The Other World?

P = Oh yeah! I became a...

T = Who went? Who was there? I mean hippie types, sixties protest people...?

P = Yeah, Most of whom were gay. There were a number of straight women there, which in those days were fag hags. Whatever that meant.

T = How many people would be at a meeting?

P = Twelve, thirteen?

T = When would the meetings be?

P = It would be once a week. I think it was Wednesday nights? I'm a little fuzzy on that.

So I sort of became part of the charter group and then we incorporated when we moved to the place in Maplewood.

Now at the same time this was going on, I was also a student here at Rutgers in Newark and there was a group that formed here. It was called R.A.G.E.—Rutgers Association for Gay Equality or something like that. So I would attend those meetings sometimes also.

W = What would happen at the meetings? Describe a consciousness raising meeting in 1971 in the basement of The Other World.

P = So, It was a couple of things. It was people telling their stories. Something that we had never dared to do with anyone. Your story had to be kept under wraps, so to speak. So it was telling our stories. There would be songs that people would write about being gay, about wanting freedom and liberation. And then there was also an awful lot of, I mean as only young people in their twenties can do, ego posturing. I mean this was sort of the way that we were working out our desire for power or for recognition, all of those things that go with unreflective hormonal personalities that are on automatic pilot, kind of acting out. You don't realize that you are acting out, you know, the worst parts of your megalomania. So I think there was a lot of that, that went out.

There were factions. People who thought that this should be a forum for drag shows and things of that nature and those of us that thought that it should be a forum for intellectual conversation and understanding of the issues and political activism. So there was always that kind of division

in those kinds of groups in those days and certainly in what eventually became the Organization for Gay Awareness.

Gratefully what prevailed, at least at the time, was mostly the intellectual activism discussion stuff. So there would be discussions on particular topics. I remember at the time, [Richard] Plant's *The Pink Triangle* had been published so we invited him. He came from NYC and gave a talk on what happened to homosexuals in Nazi Germany. So there would be those kinds of things.

W = Was this still at The Other World or was this after the move? When was the move?

P = The move was very early in the 1970s. I want to say around '71? I could be wrong there. So this was very early on and he came to The Other World.

T = Really?

P = Yeah.

T = Wow, he gave a talk there?

P = And gave a talk, yeah.

T = In the basement?

P = In the basement. To twelve or thirteen of us. Which was a big crowd in those days! You have to remember, for Newark! I mean, we're talking Newark. I always had this weird theory about Newark in relationship to New York. So it's 11.5 miles. So for every mile from Newark that you move towards New York, you advance by 10 years, and every mile that you come towards Newark from New York you go backwards in time by 10 years! [laughter]

So thirteen people in the basement of a bar on North 5th street in Newark in 1970 or '71 with [Richard] Plant giving a lecture was great progress for Newark. As opposed to the 150 years into the future that you would get 11.5 miles away in NYC! [laughter]

T = Oh, I'm glad Clem [Price] is not here! [laughter]

W = Yeah, I think Clem would probably respectfully disagree. [chuckles]

P = Yes, he would, I have no doubt! And since I knew him well, he would just come right out and say it! [laughter]

But that was my experience at the time and it was a way that I sort of theorized about it as a young man. I mean, I don't think that is the case now, but I did then.

W = So the people who are coming to these meetings...I mean is this a multi-racial group or mostly white?

P = Mostly white.

W = Mostly or entirely?

P = I would say entirely. There was one straight Cuban guy who would definitely identify in the white spectrum of possibilities for Cubans. But everyone else was pretty much either Italian or Irish or English or something like that. So definitely white.

W = And the idea was consciousness raising not necessarily direct action activism?

P = No, I don't think that we really knew what activism meant in those days at least in terms of Newark. I think we were all very much aware of the difference between Newark and NYC in terms of activism and the possibilities. And we were scared, how could you not be? I mean given Newark's history with the police and corruption and all of those things. Fear definitely put a cap on a lot of things.

Then there was also the risk of what was going to happen to you, just on a day to day basis, if people knew who you were. When Joseph and I actually came out and "Hey, say it loud, I'm gay and I'm proud," we also lost most of our friends because of that. Who we had grown up with. Who were all straight and we became like....

T = This was around that time 1970, '71?

P = Yeah. Yeah, I mean we lost pretty much all of our friends, because they were all moving in the direction that straight people moved in— going steady, getting married. You know these are the things that society told you to do. Joseph and I were walking around wearing broaches on our tweed suit jackets that we got at the Goodwill Rescue Mission for five cents and piercing one ear and wearing those weird high heeled platform shoes that Traffic was singing about in "The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys" and scarves around our neck and listening to *Joni Mitchell's Court and Spark* and we were like freaks to them! [laughter] There was like this huge cavern between us. So we lost a lot of friends and had to start from scratch in many ways with few exceptions. That was painful. Very painful.

W = Yeah... You mention police. Were you ever harassed by police in Newark for being gay or effeminate or perceived as other? Or, if not, were you aware of broader sort of anti-queer policing?

P = Oh definitely. I was certainly periodically harassed by police.

W = What would they do?

P = For example, if I was walking in the park, they would stop me and ask me what I was doing there. Tell me to get out of the park. Once I was attacked or mugged by someone and I called the police. They came and they tried to make it look like it was my fault, because I was obviously gay. And you know if you want to walk around being gay, you're asking for it. Sort of like with women, well if you want to dress provocatively, then this is what you get. So that was definitely part of the mentality.

T = Where were you mugged?

P = On Mount Prospect Avenue in Newark, which is where I lived at the time. I had an apartment. It wasn't too far from where my mother lived a few blocks away. So there were those kinds of things for sure.

W = Would they raid The Other World or Murphy's at all that you were aware of?

P = Well, they did, I wasn't there, but I know they did raid The Other World once and I think they raided Murphy's quite a few times. I mean, I wasn't there for any of that. Just the luck of the draw, I'm sure.

T = Were people that you knew generally afraid of the police...?

P = Oh yeah.

T = What was their...?

P = I mean one of the guys who was part of the O.G.A., he was peeing in the woods, but he was arrested for sexual...I mean this was years ago when there was no such thing as a sex offender list, registry, or any of those things, but he was arrested and it was...you know as I watched that documentary last night and I thought of the ways that the police can misconstrue things to a narrative that works to their advantage. Here was a guy who was just peeing in the bushes like guys did all the time and somehow it was misconstrued into he was trying to entice someone by exposing himself and all of those kinds of things. So you had to be afraid of the police, but you also had to be afraid of pretty much any guy who wasn't gay. Right, because they could justifiably... The police certainly were not going to come and arrest that guy for beating up a fag. They were doing what straight guys were supposed to do to fags. Beat them up, teach them a lesson! So they will stop being gay and they'll straighten out, so to speak. And if that wasn't the motive, just because homosexuals are such despicable, disposable creatures, freaks of nature, then they are exempt from all of the social considerations that others are given.

I even think that's why in my own case, one of the reasons why as a child who was obviously exhibiting "gay traits," whatever that is, I became prime target, because you think, "Oh, he's disposable, he's one of those. Surely we can prey upon him and get away with it." I mean I remember, this is going back of course, some woman's husband sexually abusing me and the woman found out and went to my mother and told my mother that she needed to get me under control! That I was at nine, ten years old, the seducer! The perpetrator! How wild is that!

T = Did she try to get you under control?

P = She tried! Whatever that means. [chuckles] I think my mother was just not good at dealing with any of these things. She did not want to face the reality that she had a gay kid. I could tell you, when I did come out to my mother at 19 or 20 years old, she told me she always knew it and it was okay. But whenever I was out with her, even as an adult, and tried to talk about my life or said I thought a man was good looking, she would silence me.

"Don't talk about those things in front of me."

So yeah, I don't know how I went off on that, but I guess it just brought it up, asking these questions about the police and stuff. I don't think we thought about it in those days as police... We thought about it, or at least I did, I'm not going to speak for others, I thought about it as I have to be afraid of every straight guy who had the social license, sanction, to do with me as he willed. And I had no defense whatsoever.

W = Can we go back to The Other World for a bit? I mean we talked about the basement. Maybe the social world of The Other World itself. I don't know if you remember from Sanctuary, I found an ad from it from 1975, but that's the only paper trail I've ever seen on it. Do you know the history of that bar? How long it had been there? How long it had been a gay bar?

P = I think it was something else before and it became a gay bar around '71, something like that. I am imagining, I don't know this for the case, except I know the general pattern for gay bars at that time and even in NYC, they were often not owned by gay people and they were often paying bribes to the authorities and they were often Mafioso run and operated.

And in fact, I can tell you, just to go backward in time for a moment. I had my eleventh birthday party in a private gay club off of Broadway in Newark that my mother's Mafioso boyfriend ran and operated. And it was in a house hidden in the woods alongside the Mount Pleasant Cemetery on Broadway in Newark. Right? So now imagine this. And my friends' parents during the day are bringing their kids to this house that is hidden in these overgrown woods on this side street in Newark, where late at night it is a private gay club. This would have been in the 1960s.

W = Could you tell us more about that?

P = Well, I mean, I only learned this later from my mother's boyfriend's "good fellow" who was a few years older than me and actually happened to be gay himself. It was he, who clued me into where my eleventh birthday party had taken place and it was on Herbert Place in Newark, which is right off of Bloomfield Avenue [*PS correction: Broadway, not Bloomfield Avenue*]. So it was... I think this is now a police precinct, but the Rutgers School of Pharmacy used to be right on the corner of Arlington Avenue and Broadway and right across the street from it was Herbert Place. The cemetery was there. There was a firehouse and you would go down this street along the cemetery that would go out to route 21, or McCarter Highway as you may know it. And so it was there. So I know for a fact, that that's probably what the paradigm for The Other World, probably Mafioso connected.

T = Can you describe the bar?

P = So the downstairs was supposed to also be a place where people could dance except when whatever the group that became the O.G.A. met there. What I remember about upstairs, and this is all very fuzzy, was loads of colored lights. I don't think it was a glass ball. I don't think they had them yet. It was more like one of those color wheels that they used to shine on aluminum Christmas trees. So I just remember the kaleidoscope of the primary colors. And there was a bar and all kinds of like silver, tinsel-like, streamers hanging from the ceiling and the bar had an end on it that was like leather so you could lean your elbows on it. And there were benches. That's what I remember.

The bar was here. You walked in this way. You could go downstairs. The bar was the biggest thing there and then there was an area where there could be dancing.

T = Upstairs as well?

P = Upstairs, not downstairs.

T = Did you see people dancing ever there?

P = Yes.

T = Same sex dancing?

P = Yeah, but I think in those days you still had to be very careful about same sex dancing.

T = I would think so. It actually surprises me that there would have been that early.

P = Yes, but there was. Yeah, there was.

T = They had drinks? No food?

P = Drinks. No food. Drinks.

W = Who would go...not to the political meetings, but who would go to the bar?

P = Mostly white men, gay men. Not only from Newark, because there were no gay bars, not that I know of anyway, in the surrounding suburbs.

T = Would they drive there and park?

P = Yes, probably drive there and park or come by public transportation, which you could easily and safely do in those days. And the Park Avenue Newark subway station was right there. So you could get off the subway and you could then get on it and go to Penn Station in Newark and get a train or a bus to wherever you were going to go.

T = What kind of building and neighborhood?

P = It was all residential. There was an elementary school next block over and it was all residential, not single dwelling. Those very typical Newark two-three family dwellings and a three story apartment house here or there, but mostly those very close together row houses that are historic for Newark, you can still see in many places today. Mostly those.

T = And the building? It was just a bar?

P = It was just a bar.

W = Did the people in the neighborhood know that it was a gay bar?

P = You know, I don't know that. I would imagine eventually they did. Right? I don't know how long it even lasted.

T = How would you get there?

P = Well, for me, it was nothing. I would either walk or take a bus or drive with friends. By this point, we all had licenses, we didn't all have cars. So I could get there by car.

T = Did you like it?

P = No.

T = Why not?

P = Because it was all that stuff that made me feel like I had just landed from another planet and I was an alien and I just did not want to feel like an alien. I realize now, because of my involvement with sociology and anthropology, stigma is a really horrible thing and it's very painful and people just don't want to be stigmatized, no matter what. And I was just horrified of being stigmatized. Which I was anyway! [chuckles] But you know...the stench of stigma as Goffman would say!

W = For *The Other World*, the emotional tenor of the place, I mean, the way you're describing it, it does not sound like a joyful place.

P = I don't think any of those places were joyful places. Right? I don't know if you could relate to this. Have you ever watched Guy Lombardo on New Year's Eve on TV?

W = No...

P = It always had this sort of forced joyful melancholy about it like most New Year's Eve's do for most people. [laughter] So this was like one perpetual New Year's Eve of forced joyful melancholy sadness just beneath the surface. Tragedy. [laughs] I mean this *is* my take on it...You know, but no. I never found those places to be joyful places. How could they be? I mean, even though you were there celebrating and dancing and all. Mostly dancing, I think, in those days in the gay community functioned as a way of you escaping from your pain and your stress and your oppression.

T = When you say those places...?

P = Like gay clubs. Even the GAA Firehouse.

T = Really?

P = I mean, think about it. I mean in those days it was an old fire...I mean it's Soho now, high-end gentrified Soho, in those days it was a bunch of warehouses with an old abandoned firehouse in the middle of it. There were no homes like you know...there were loading platforms and trash in the street and it was dark. So just the journey there from the 9th street PATH station was bleak. You really did have a sense that you were going into an underworld. Think of that opening scene of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in the deep dark woods, you had a sense of that.

T = That's a gap in my education. [laughter]

P = Yes, that is definitely a gap in your life experience let us say, dear Tim! [laughter]

T = Fair enough! What was the next gay bar that you went to after Julius and *The Other World*?

P = Well it was mostly the Firehouse and a lot of those gay bars on 7th Avenue in NYC. But then I became more and more involved with my boyfriend. So we mostly, if we went to any gay bars, we stayed local. One of them was Penelope's in nearby East Orange that we would go to often. And another place across the street from it called Dupes.

Then around 1975 or '76, my boyfriend and I broke up and I was devastated by that. Then I began going to NYC and I discovered all of these big private gay discos like *12 West* and the *Paradise Garage*. And it was sort of like *Disc-O-Teen* without the TV and everybody was gay! [laughs] Before I knew it I had a regular membership to get in and these were private clubs! And you showed up at midnight and you stayed there till eleven next morning and you just danced your brains out all night with finger symbols, and fans, and feathers! [laughs]

There was a huge shift, and this was, of course, the beginning of the big disco era. Like I witnessed the shift from mostly R&B black oriented disco, which I always preferred, to this high end white gay boy stuff that the only way you could move your body was from here up, because the beat was always so fast you couldn't catch a beat with your pelvis or below your hips. It was just so fast and constraining.

So that's sort of where I probably spent most of my dancing life between the *12 West* and *Paradise Garage* until the emergence of AIDS, around 1981-82, when things changed terribly drastically. Also during that period, I got a job bartending at a gay bar on Christopher Street called *Boots and Saddles*, otherwise known as *Bras and Girdles*, or *Booze and Sadness*. It's still there to this day.

T = I think it might have closed very recently...like within the last year.

P = Oh really? Oh okay. So I bartended there in 1977, the year of one of the big blackouts...

T = It's way towards the river, right?

P = No, it's right on Christopher Street, right at *Sheridan Square*. Three-four doors in from *Sheridan Square*. No, you may have been thinking of *Ty's*.

T = Maybe...

P = Which was down the street.

T = Doesn't matter.

P = This was sort of at the height of Anita Bryant and gay liberation...

T = That was your main job at the time?

P = That was my main job at the time. Yes.

T = And you would get there from...?

P = I lived in Newark on *Mount Prospect Avenue*. I had my own apartment. I would take either the 27 bus and then walk to *Penn Station* or I would walk up through the park and get on the Newark city subway to *Penn Station* and get on the *Hudson Tubes*, it wasn't the *PATH* train yet,

and take it to 9th Street and walk over or to Christopher Street and get off and walk up from the river.

I started there as a floor man, so cleaning up. And then I became bartender from 11 at night till 4 in the morning when it closed. And then from there from 3 in the afternoon to 11 at night until I left to go back with my boyfriend who I had broken up with. So we broke up and got back together two or three times over the eight or nine years we were together. And it was always, believe it or not, we always broke up around issues of sex. For example, I wanted monogamy and faithfulness and he was polyamorous. So every spring, he would break up with me [...] and then when the leaves began to fall, he would return home to my pasta, as they say! [laughter]

So finally, the last time, which was I guess around '77, I was in the bar and you know being a bartender in gay NYC in those days was an incredible experience. You were like a celebrity. I mean you could pretty much have whoever you wanted, whenever you wanted, why-ever you wanted. So he showed up in the bar and said, "Let's get back together, but this time the only way it's going to work is if you agree to have sex with other people also." And I reluctantly agreed to it. And it didn't make any difference whether we monogamous or having sex with other people. It just wasn't a good relationship. [chuckles] So finally around 1981, '82, we separated and never got back together again.

T = How had you met in the first place?

P = We met at that first O.G.A. meeting that I went to in the basement of The Other World on the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, on my first day home from being at a Catholic religious order! And it was love at first sight! [laughter]

T = Wow, that is quite a story!

P = Yeah, I know that is quite a story.

T = So that would be 1970...'71?

P = 1971. Yeah, we were together about...I mean altogether we knew each other about 10 years. We were broken up once for a year and a half and I think two other times for about a year. So altogether it was a seven year relationship, not consecutive, with periods of interruption.

But quite ironically, the reason why we separated was for spiritual reasons, believe it or not. He became involved with this kind of cult-like movement and I was getting very involved with Tibetan Buddhism at the time. So he wanted to go and live with this group at the Cornucopia Institute in Kentucky and I did not want to go. So you know, he said, "Well, I'm going to leave you." And for some reason a moment of sanity came over me and I said, "Okay!" [laughter] As opposed to my usual being devastated, heartbroken, depressed for months, years, whatever, hoping he'll come back. I quickly got over that!

W = So in the early years of your relationship though, your social life was more grounded in Newark than in NY. What was it like being a couple in Newark?

P = It involved very little of gay bars. Minimal. Our friends were mostly straight friends that he had grown up with and gone to high school with. And some of the O.G.A. people got grafted into that group. So we mostly hung around in the basements of each other's parents' houses.

T = Where did he go to high school?

P = Well, he went to Seton Hall Prep. He was from a very wealthy Irish Catholic family, who had once been very poor in Newark, but his father had invented one of these big security systems that would be used in all of these department stores all over the country. So they made it out of Newark and moved to South Orange. And his parents hated me and they hated me because they were Irish Catholic nouveau riche and when they saw me, they saw an Italian with olive oil and basil and garlic just exuding from every pore in his body! And the aura of provolone around me like Pig Pen in the Peanuts comic strip. [laughter] And given my experience of family, I was very suspicious and distrustful of family. And they were a family that was totally under the control and power of their parents for a lot of reasons. One of them being, the parents had all the money. Whereas, I was from a family that was poorer than piss! [chuckles] You know, and not very functional. So I was unwilling to be indoctrinated into the vast Irish Catholic family system.

T = So the parents didn't reject him for being gay or disown him or anything?

P = No, they didn't. I don't think they liked it! And they certainly didn't like it when he brought home the greasy Italian! [laughter] Who had, you know, very independent ideas of his own! Right? That they did not like! [laughter]

W = Did you two live together in Newark?

P = We lived together in Newark on Mount Prospect Avenue. And in fact, if you ever...I think I have a copy of it...but there used to be a magazine published by the Newark Chamber of Commerce called *Metro Newark*. And in the late '70s, they did an article on people living in Newark and one of them was on he and I. And there is a picture of us in it.

T = No kidding! Wow!

P = I have a copy of it. Two friends of mine, I gave it to them, but I can get you a copy of it.

W = Oh my god, please!

P = The article was written by Sylvia Guarino and it's about people living singularly in Newark or as roommates. So it didn't openly say we were a gay couple, but it was obvious by the way...well, the writer knew us, she lived in the same building as us on Mount Prospect Avenue, so it was the way that she wrote about us that you could tell, we were different than the others they were writing about.

T = This was late '70s?

P = I think it would have been very late '70s, maybe even 1980. It was definitely...No, I would say it was probably '79, '78, because we lived in this beautiful tudor apartment building on Mount Prospect Avenue in Newark and we eventually moved to another beautiful tudor

apartment building in Newark and that was where we separated. So this was written in the first building and we moved from there in '79. And we lived in the other building from '79 to '81.

T = And when you say some of the O.G.A. people were part of your friendship network, does that mean you would go to meetings together?

P = Yeah, we would go to meetings together! Sometimes we would even have...I remember there was like an O.G.A. board, so we would have meetings in each other's places. And they would eventually evolve into parties with music and listening to Renaissance and Yes and Alice Coltrane! [laughs] I brought Alice Coltrane, they all thought I was weird, I loved Alice Coltrane. [laughter]

T = The O.G.A., by this point, was in Maplewood. Did most people in it live in the suburbs or live in Newark or both?

P = They lived all over the place. So there were people who lived in Maplewood, people who lived in Montclair who were part of it, people who lived in Newark, people who lived in South Orange. There were even people who came from Elizabeth, nearby Elizabeth, who were a part of it. So it was really all over the place.

W = By the late '70s, you're working down in Christopher St, that's clearly where the happening scene is. Why do you stay in Newark, rather than move into the city?

P = Here's the moment of true confession, right? [laughter] So I'm probably the only anthropologist you are ever going to meet who hates to travel! So thus all of my fieldwork has been practically in Newark or the surrounding area! [laughter] And I had an opportunity actually, other than when I was in a religious order and I lived in NYC, I had an opportunity in 1977 to rent an apartment on the next street over from Christopher Street, would have been...? I think West 10th street? It goes down toward the water. So I had an opportunity to rent a beautiful apartment there for like sixty five dollars a month! And I just could not bring myself to leave Newark. I felt so attached to it. And all of my childhood friends, who I was still connected to, the few of them that were left, Joseph, whoever, and whatever was left of my family was here. So there was that.

W = I would go back at this time to Rutgers and R.A.G.E.

P = And I actually have some pictures with me on Rutgers campus at that time and what I looked like. I have them electronically. They're black and whites. I'll forward them to you [...] I actually had hair and a beard! It's so hard to believe! As opposed to my Foucault self now! I hate when people tell me I look like Michel Foucault. I think, "That's why I can't get a date!" [laughter]

W = You know I never would have thought it! Now that you say it, I see it!

P = Oh man, I have somebody, a former student of mine...He's in graduate school at U-Penn now and he sent me a picture of this guy and I said, "How did you get that photo of me?" And he said, "It's not! It's Foucault." [laughter] I mean, this how scary it was.

T = When were you at Rutgers?

P = I was in Rutgers... This was in that whole very weird period between 1971 and 1975 where I was in and out of Catholic monasteries, in and out of being gay and straight, in and out of school, getting a college degree, not getting a college degree, which I never did complete during those years and so I was here at Rutgers a couple times. Somewhere around 1971, '72 and then a little later around '74, '75, '76. I was a Fine Arts major initially. Then I left to go to Montclair State where I was a Fine Arts and a Dance major. I started out, and then I discovered Religious Studies. And I became a Religious Studies major and that's what I eventually got my bachelor's degree in, Religious Studies and Philosophy.

So that period... like that whole... the plaza and everything looked very differently than it does now. They had just built Hill Hall. In those days, you could go to Rutgers totally for free and have loads of money left over from the government to do whatever you wanted. And I went to both Montclair State and Rutgers for not a penny. Not a penny out of my pocket. Not a penny. And you could fail out and goof off as badly as ever and still be in school! [laughs]

T = Why did you leave Rutgers to go to Montclair State?

P = I left Rutgers to go to Montclair State, because I wanted to do textile arts and they had weaving there and textile arts—a big studio.

T = But then of course you ended up in Religious Studies?

P = Right. Yeah. And while I was here and while I was at Montclair State, I always took modern dance classes. Which helped me out in later years when I had to do the voguing stuff for my fieldwork in graduate school and all that stuff. It all really served me well. And also that whole crowd that I hung around with, with my boyfriend, and the O.G.A. people, most of them went here to Rutgers in Newark. My boyfriend went to Montclair State, but all of his friends that I had met, they all went to school here and they were all Fine Arts or Literature majors or something like that. So I was hanging out with them all the time.

T = When you say the campus looked different, can you describe?

P = Yeah, so in other words all these buildings over here, they were not there. Like New Street was totally open. You could walk straight into New Street. The parking lot on the other side of this building was not there. The Law School, none of that was there. The parking deck was not there. This was here. The other building was there. Hill Hall had just been opened. The campus center had just become the Robeson Campus Center. You know where they have all of those sort of shrubs out on the plaza? So around all of those shrubs were these wooden benches that you could sit on. There were none of the tables with the umbrellas. None of that was there. The Dana Library, there was no extension on that Dana Library. There was no extension on the Robeson Campus Center. None of that was there. Those were all parking lots or open space. So it was different in that regard. And the Fine Arts department was way down on Rector Street. Over by the Y.M.C.A. That was where the ceramics studios were, the dance studios were. And also the business school was in the old Fireman's Fund Insurance Company Building, which is right next to the Newark Public Library. I don't know, is that still part of Rutgers now that building?

W = I think it is actually.

P = Yeah, so the campus was not expanded like it is now.

T = And R.A.G.E.?

P = So R.A.G.E. was a very small group. It was really struggling in those days. It was struggling in spite of the University administration. I think, like with most university campuses in those days, they begrudgingly allowed those kinds of student organizations to exist. So let's face it, you weren't getting huge funding from the Dean's office or the Provost or the Dean of Student Affairs or the Student Government Association. So I remember it being a very small, beleaguered group. We would meet in empty classrooms. There was no scheduled place for us to meet. Everything was very impromptu.

T = What did you do?

P = Same sort of thing that would go on in like the O.G.A. You would just sit around and talk.

W = Did the members overlap with O.G.A.? Because you said a bunch of those people were here too.

P = No, because what I remember about the Rutgers group, it didn't have the sort of straight component that O.G.A. did. And I really only remember it being about six or seven, maybe eight people, most of whom were men. Maybe there was one, two, women in the group.

W = Did it have to have a faculty advisor or sponsor as a student group?

P = I don't remember any of that. I don't remember. Wish I could, but it is really fuzzy. You know, the reason why it's fuzzy for me is because I was so conflicted and torn in those days that I was in and out. I was always giving up the gay life and re-embracing it and giving it up. It would all depend on how long my libido would build up and I couldn't take it anymore and then I would explode into liberation, so to speak. Until I got horrified by what that meant and I would retreat back into holy mother church and the safe womb of the Virgin Mary and Lord Jesus and celibacy.

T = Do you remember the name of anyone who was involved in R.A.G.E.?

P = None.

W = Did R.A.G.E. last or was it sort of brief?

P = That I don't know either, because once I left to go to Montclair State, and by that point so many things in my life were changing. I don't think I had any real contact with Rutgers, Newark again until I was in graduate school in the Newark Project so that would have been in the mid-1990s.

T = And you left here to go to Montclair State, when?

P = Must have been around '75.

T = Okay, but R.A.G.E. was it here both times?

P = Yes, it was here both times.

T = And it had the same name at least? [laughs]

P = Yes, it had the same name, at least as I remember it. However beleaguered it may have been. I mean that's what I remember, but once again, the problem with memory is that it gets all fakokida.

T = I mean this is more than we know.

W = So when would you say gay activism, in sort of a conventional or traditional sense, enters Newark? Not conscious raising, but sort of actions or protest or that kind of activism? Was that happening at all in the '70s?

P = No. I would say that didn't really start until the '90s. I happened to reappear on the scene just when that kind of stuff was happening. You know and a lot of it was many of the cast of characters that you know. James Credle, Don Ransom, it was around the time Liberation in Truth came, the Houses were there, but becoming more visible in Newark. Because remember it was around that time that *Paris is Burning*, in the very early in the '90s, appeared in the movie theatres in NYC, and so that put that way of life, and all of that family structure, and the ballroom scene, all on the map.

W = I think of the emergence of AIDs as a kind of rupture moment where things change. So before that, I mean, what else should we be asking you about the '70s? I mean we have covered so much. But the sort of narrative that we've covered sort of trails off in the '70s. So what else should we...?

P = I think the things that stand out to me the most have little to do with gay life and more to do with the emptying out of Newark. I mean it was going on since 1967 in drips and drabs. But I would say really around 1976, 1977, you begin to see the end of Newark at least as I knew it. The big department stores are leaving. More and more people who are non-African American are leaving the city. There was a huge influx of Latinos. This was the beginning of the *marielita* boat lifts out of Cuba, so that brought in huge influx of Cubans into Newark. The Ironbound is changing. The Italians, the Eastern Europeans, the Germans, the Greeks that were there are all going out. It's becoming more and more solidly Portuguese with the beginning of Brazilians and Central Americans showing up. And downtown Newark is slowly no longer the place that you want to get on the bus or take a walk down to Dunkin Donuts and get a glazed twist. All of those shops are beginning to disappear. Things are more shuttered. Stores are beginning to change. The appearance of these precursors to the Dollar Stores are showing up. Suddenly what was all of McCrory's is no longer McCrorys. Kresge's is now the Newark Board of Education building. All of those things are happening.

It continues on well...I mean, I did not move out of Newark until 1991, 1992, so from the late '70s through then, you see...all of these hopes and promises of renaissance, you know everybody

thought because they refurbished a few brownstones on James Street, Newark is going to become the new Beacon Hill of Boston and Back Bay. You know, none of that ever transpired.

You know that pattern that has been described for so many other cities like Newark, become the pattern in Newark. And that is, invest in the center of town and do nothing for all the poor living in the houses in all the neighborhoods and the streets. So that begins to happen in downtown Newark as well. And it begins to become more and more corporatized and less and less friendly for people to actually walk on the streets. Things are rearranged so that you could come from Livingston and never step foot on a street in Newark and drive right into a garage for some beautiful sterile high rise office building, whatever it is. And you can get back in your car and go back to your safe little suburbs afterwards.

So I just remember... talk about feelings of desolation, how sad and heart-breaking that was to me. You know, watching that happen.

T = And so that was underway from the late '60s and kind of gradually over the course of the '70s? Did you expect that it would continue? Did the further decline seem...?

P = Yeah, it did. And you know, I can tell you, even coming back here as a graduate student just living the next town over in Bloomfield, where I still live now, and coming here on an almost daily basis with the exception of what we were doing, the various meetings we were in here on Rutgers campus, I mean, Newark was pretty desolate. You know, even at noon. You know, there were people on the streets, but there just were no...there were no shops. I mean, I could remember, we had funding from Prudential. We had a grant from the Prudential Foundation and we had to come down to have a meeting...

T = For the Newark Project?

P = Yeah, for the Newark Project. We had to come down and have a meeting and we wanted to find somewhere to eat lunch and we could find no place where you could actually sit down and have a wait person come to the table. Everything was these sort of salad bar restaurants and you walked out with your little Styrofoam thing filled with salad. I mean, there was just no place that you could go. And I just remember thinking, remembering what I knew as a young man and a child about all the different places you could go and sit. There was no possibility for that. You know and I'm talking in the '90s. Mid-90s. Yeah, so it was pretty bad.

But there was a lot of, it seemed like, attempts to build community. I think people felt besieged. I mean, that's what I remember about so much of our work with the Newark Project was how disenfranchised and besieged people felt. And I'm not talking just about the LGBTQI community. I mean, you got to remember that during the AIDS crises, what put Newark on the map. That it had the highest percentage of children and heterosexual women with AIDS in the country. And Pat Closer and Bill Oleske were doing all the research down at U.M.D.N.J. and the old Presbyterian Hospital, United Hospitals, which is no longer in existence. So people were really feeling besieged and abandoned and resources were sorely limited.

END OF PART ONE