

POWELL: I did. I came out to my brother immediately, and then, actually it was a year or so before coming out to my mother. My mother actually came to visit us in our home, and we were presenting ourselves then as just, we were two women living together, we both teach at Brooklyn College, to my mother. But then it was like, within a few months after that that I said, you know, I went home at Christmas and I had to tell her that I was gay. And it was so important that I did that because by the time *Word is Out* came, you know, it was all over and all the uncles and the cousins and this and that who hadn't been told individually and so forth knew, and my mother was able to deal with it from there. But it was the family tensions, I guess, that in some ways kind of also drew us closer together, in terms of her defending who you are.

ANDERSON: Was your Catholic faith a shared bond between you or had you moved far away from it at this point?

POWELL: We had both moved far away from it but it was still a shared bond in that we had some language and perspectives and whatever in common, though we were, neither of us, practicing, you know, Catholicism at that time. There were some real joys in, sort of, the continual discovery at that time of what it meant to be lesbian. The discovery of lesbian, you know, lesbians period. You know, and lesbian literature and art and music, and all this stuff.

And the discovery of the political was just, you know, eye opening. Beyond eye opening. It just opened up, again, the possibility for me of, here's where I get to really cast down my lot and struggle and engage in making a contribution to human rights. And I really did see it in that broad sense, because it was about my blackness and about my gender, you know, and my feminism and it was about my sexual orientation, all together.

And it was about the issues that I cared about. Because there were ways in which out of the progressive lesbians that we knew who were themselves lesbian feminists, that an analysis and a concern for class issues and for issues around — I mean, definitely, you know, heterosexual women in terms of violence and abortion. These things were really very important, and race and racism. This is the only place where I have found in the lesbian-gay movement, there is really an analysis and some real work and concern around racism, was within the progressive lesbian feminist wing, or arm, of the LGBT movement.

So all of those things were calling me and I was, as compared to the black civil rights movement where, as I was saying, I was not in the right place, you know, to be fully engaged in that movement, it felt like I was in the right place at the right time, and there was a movement going on here and we both got involved in the Gay Academic Union. And sort of my first stepping out onto the stage of activism was from

this place of, you know, that the world can recognize very clearly, Betty Jean, the oratorical aspect of me, the public presentation of self was, like, I can do that. You want me to speak? You want me to, what was it, chair this conference? Oh, we can do that, of course. And so there I am, you know, chairing the Gay Academic Union and it's year one and year two, and you know, my colleagues at Brooklyn College going, "Oh, Betty, you don't really want to do that because, you know, you're going to be up for tenure." We were up for tenure after five years at that time. And I said, "Oh, yes, I do. And if anything happens because of this, then oh boy, do we have a wonderful suit."

ANDERSON: Were you both going for tenure?

POWELL: We both did get tenure. We both got tenure. [phone]

ANDERSON: We were talking about you and Ginny getting tenure and you becoming involved with the Academic Union.

POWELL: I guess the whole notion of the right place at the right time, as far as the feeling I could engage around multiple facets of addressing — I don't want to use such a simple — it seems almost a simple term to say addressing human oppression, but that's what it is. Addressing it as it certainly was affecting my life, but the opportunity to me that really loomed and where the responsibility fell was that, as it affected the lives of so many who were like me and those who were not. I'm talking the lives of heterosexual women. The passion for the lives of women and the impact of the lives of women came from this moment of accepting my life as a woman who loved women and my love for women and the lives of women in a larger sense, beyond an erotic and emotional romantic sense, was just kicked into high gear.

And then, always the love and the commitment to my race, black people on this planet, but in particular, African Americans, those of African descent here, was kicked into gear and that rippled out to other folks of color as it always had, but it was magnified now. And it was magnified because the possibilities of actually having an impact on that through this movement that was called the gay movement, the gay civil rights movement, because I then was so, to me, I was more embedded in this piece of this pocket of the more radical lesbian feminist articulation of that movement, while always connecting with the gay boys and — we had to.

ANDERSON: So you felt the lesbian feminist piece that you were most connected to as a subgroup of the gay movement, or as more tightly connected to that movement versus the women's movement. Or really did it live half way between?

POWELL: It was the link to the women's movement, and so I felt of a piece, I felt a real entitlement, and it connected me to the feminist movement, to the women's movement. And the National Black Feminist Organization, we're working always from that, that lesbian feminist place, we're working always with other feminists around so many different issues, around abortion rights, around domestic violence, around, say, at Brooklyn College, immediately, I land there and I'm engaged in helping to establish women's studies. So, I'm working with my colleagues who are feminists who are not, you know, lesbian, and it's the feminist piece that's driving us. We're engaged with fighting the administration and so forth to establish a women's center. We deal with class there. We deal with gender, the sexism and the whole piece, just to get the women's center, and we're doing it as lesbians who are out, I think. So yes, I certainly saw it was a subset, but in terms of the ways that I was working, I was operating — and, we were working with the gay movement. I then went on to become a member of the board of the National Gay Task Force, where we spent a lot of time pushing that lesbian was an integral part of this movement and you've got to put it in, it has to be a part of the face of it, so the National — they said, gay-lesbian, I said, lesbian-gay movement — it was all of a piece and there were ways to begin to really, as I said, struggle against this human oppression but for human rights.

Though we weren't using the term human rights as such, I always talked about — anytime, and that, of course, is one of the ways that I most expressed my activism, where my activism showed up was me speaking at engagements, at conferences, at rallies. Again, it was a time of making visible lesbian and the face of lesbians who were feminists also. So we were everywhere, until we were on radio and on television, any old television show, anything that you could get on, you know, you did it, et cetera.

So I'm showing up the way and I'm always talking about the fact that — I mean, almost always introducing myself as I can never just stand up here and talk to you about gay rights. That was usually the platform that I was coming in on. Because I see the interconnection of lesbian, the gay civil rights movement, I would say, and women's liberation and the black civil rights struggle as one.

ANDERSON: And where for you were the pockets of the movement where those things came together the best? You said you found these really radical progressive lesbian feminists who really did see the interconnection. How was it true for a lot of the women's movement and was it true for a lot of the gay movement? So, what organizations or pockets — was it the Lesbian Feminist Liberation? Was it National Black Feminists? Was it GAU — I mean, where were you most at home?

POWELL: It was definitely not GAU. And I say that in that we actually staged a walkout. The women in GAU, who were by and large, that pocket of radical lesbian feminists — and I'm using the word radical a little too loosely because there was a whole movement of radical lesbian feminists that stands by itself. And so, I'm going to say progressive? Progressive lesbian feminists, all of whom were really radical, like Julia Stanley, folks like that were really radical. And so not in GAU. In GAU, actually, by the time we were doing the conference at, I guess it was Columbia, we planned — Joan Nestle was a part of that. Deb Edel who, both of them together had founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Julia [Penelope] Stanley was a part of that. Meryl Friedman, who was one of the women who headed the Gay Teacher's Association.

ANDERSON: How many women of color in this walkout?

POWELL: I was it. I was it at GAU for a long time, for a long time. I'm trying to think, because see, I don't want to —

ANDERSON: But that was your —

POWELL: falsify or distort history —

ANDERSON: but it felt like you were the only one —

POWELL: Yes, exactly, thank you. Thank you, because at different times, I know there were people who came and went and so forth, but in the New York place, I was it. And so, it was a big thing of me always having to show up in a sense larger than life, if you like, in order to always be keeping that issue, the issue of race, on the table, and not that other people weren't putting it there, but yeah. Just by virtue of my presence. Oh, so, yeah, so we did a walkout. So that wasn't the place. Within that, the women's grouping there, there was.

So you say, where did I find home? It wasn't within organizations. It was within organizations like the National Gay Task Force. The National Gay Task Force had a women's caucus. And the women's caucus was, you know, people like Charlotte Bunch and, OK, there's got to be other names, I mean, every woman who was there was part of the women's caucus, but I'm trying to think of the really radical women. Kay Whitlock, Dorothy Riddle. [And Frances Doughty, Meryl Friedman, Barbara Love, Sidney Abbott]

So the women's caucus in the National Gay Task Force is where I was most at home. The Gay Task Force, however, was the place where we did the work within that. I was, you know, co-chair of the board for a couple of years. I was definitely an integral part of that women's caucus and so when we were fighting the Americans Psychiatric Association and their designation of us as sick and mentally ill and so

forth. My going to their conferences and sitting on panels and so forth, was a member of the National Gay Task Force, so we're doing the work out of that. But we were informing the Task Force in terms of its proceedings with our progressive lesbian feminist agenda all the time. All the time.

ANDERSON: We have to switch the tape.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

ANDERSON: [How was the] Task Force on issues of race, at the time?

POWELL: [VHS starts here] Good-good mouth, good service, good articulation.

ANDERSON: How about representation on the Board?

POWELL: Yeah. And, you know, always looking for more people of color to be on the board, and succeeding more or less, but more less. To the point where — I stayed for four years, five years, and then I find myself a part of helping to move forward, even though I wasn't sure what exactly we were going to end up with, and not that I was a core founding member at all, but finally became very much a part of the core of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, and that was a real push to just articulate, um, that real intersection of our race and our sexuality and our gender, the class and the whole piece, and so, that was a real place of home.

Again, you know, you had people like Gwendolyn Weindling Rogers and Barbara Smith and Gil Gerald and Lidell Jackson [and Pat Parker], and, I mean, we had a conference in St. Louis, Missouri. I'll never forget it. It was just a peak experience for all of us of being able to look at issues through the lens of our black experiencing of our lesbianism, our gay, our feminism agenda.

So I was working, almost on multiple fronts, because you couldn't just do — you could, but in terms of having the impact on pending legislation, pushing elected officials or public institutions or individual groups that had, you know, impact on people's lives. To say, we're only going to do this from the vantage point of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, didn't give you as much play, or impact, you know, potentially.

So I worked — and I'm talking myself, I'm not saying, you know, anybody else, and so, you know, I did things through the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, still, you know, was continuing to fight within and through the white-dominated gay civil rights movement, which is now the lesbian and gay civil rights movement, and the feminist, how should I put it, the National Black Feminist Organization as an example of — that was certainly a place where I was also very comfortable at home, because we'd keep challenging them along the lesbian piece. Now, by and large, we found — and I say we because the ones of us who were lesbian or our close allies were working to get everybody, like, really on board with this, enjoyed more success there than in any other organization that had — now, the women themselves were having a horrible time, because, you know, Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: The Weapon of Sexism*.

It just was totally there, writ large, when women would describe to you how they had to fight their way past their husband or their son, you know, their 15-year-old son who, “Mom, you’re not going to that with all those lesbians, all those dykes,” whatever. So the straight women had to really fight the label that was so powerful to keep women in their places.

And so then, every meeting with our little agenda and we had to be on the agenda and saying our stuff. The push-pull for them. But it was an exciting place to be, to struggle around how do we see that our agendas have to be one and that where they are not one, we can support each other. So that was very exciting.

So when we end up going to, let’s say, ’77 and we’re going to the state conferences. We’re now under the reign of Jimmy Carter and every state having a conference, and we, as lesbians, being delegates to the conference in Albany and getting engaged in the political process. Not just so that we stand for our rights, but because as feminists, as lesbian feminists, that we could really stand for the rights of women in particular, in a context where the right, the political right, the conservative religious right, was also inserting themselves into those conferences and voting on those resolutions around, you know, women’s economic empowerment, women’s, the welfare rights, and moving to economic empowerment out of that and, you know, all the various aspects, the domestic violence pieces and all the policies and legislation that was trying to be pushed.

And so, that was very exciting, going from those state conferences to — and the strategizing that we did to make sure that in every state where we knew lesbians were being delegates to the state conferences, to make sure that people who got on the slate to be delegates to the national conference in Houston. And so there we end up, at the National Conference, Women’s Conference in Houston, which was amazing, and it amazes me today that we’ve only had one, that we’ve only had one. But there we were 6,000, 10,000 women.

06:

ANDERSON: You were the delegate from New York State?

POWELL: I was one of the delegates of New York State and, you know, with our little orange armband, which meant lesbians. And, it was the first time I met Barbara Smith, I think. Was that the first time? But anyways, it was the first time we did work together, and our work was, we went around and we pledged that we would get three hundred signatures of black women to sign on to support the lesbian resolution. But in turn, and it wasn’t that — even if they didn’t sign ours, if they had any resolution that they wanted us to sign, you know, regarding their lives, and so we worked, especially in collaboration with women on the welfare rights issues, who said, “Oh, we’ll get some signatures for you.”

So we went around, literally then, working and talking about lesbian rights to black women who — and that was a conference where the descriptions for some women, it looked like they took off their aprons and, you know, left their kitchens and came to the conference. Or, these were the secretaries in the newsrooms who said, “Oh, we’ve got to have some representation. You go.” And, I mean, there’s a whole other sub-story about women in journalism and the whole area of media who got incredibly empowered at that particular conference. But you had the ordinary woman who just came.

And so we found ourselves, Barbara and I, talking to a lot of these, you know, church women and just black women who were showing up as, some of them didn’t even name themselves as feminists and such, but they were for women’s rights and here we were, talking to them about lesbian rights and they were, like, ugh. And some of them were, like, totally into it. And some of them literally would turn their backs and walk away from us, and we were just (unclear).

But it was also a moment when we engaged as lesbians in the black — there was a black women’s caucus that organized. Maxine Waters that came onto the national scene, I think, in that big way for the first time, she headed that black women’s conference. But there, in terms of the multi-issues, we presented ourselves as lesbians to this black women’s caucus, made them very tense, very uncomfortable. But I mean, this was, again, the place of real struggle and we knew it, so our voices were loud and proud and out there, and I don’t mean necessarily, you know, decibel loud, but very loud and proud.

And in that context, we were presenting to them other issues that they needed to deal with. Domestic violence among them, you know, that that wasn’t just a white women’s issue and it wasn’t that, we don’t talk about, we can’t afford to *not* talk about the violence because it’s going to make our men look bad. And that we, as lesbians, could say that to them and they could lend an ear.

We could also say, And by the way — because this was the moment, we have to stand against apartheid in South Africa, you know. And they were, like, again, they were, how shall I say? I have to tell you, there was a combination, I can remember, the looks on — of kind of thrown aback and then moving forward, and I’m supposedly a little afraid but they were really proud of these young black girls standing up there. “What did they say, they were lesbians? Well, all right. But look at that! The daughters are preaching.”

So we were able to really have a platform within that black women’s caucus at the national conference, standing as lesbians. And then we also pushed the welfare rights piece because that was our commitment in terms of our collaboration in that conference. And in the end, to have the votes go for all our issues in such a tremendous way, and the ways in which people stood up for each other in that hall all around the various issues were just incredible.

You know, I'm really sorry, and I'm talking about this as I was packing to bring my stuff. I have a little box that has a lot of memorabilia from the political times, and one of them is the magazine *Lesbian Tide* and I'm on the front cover from that moment when I go up to speak. For each resolution, there were X number of people to speak [phone]. So each person is speaking, has several, you know, you lined up at the microphones to speak for the resolutions or against, and so I'm lined up to speak for the lesbian resolution.

And when I move to the microphone to speak and I start speaking and the cameras were all kind of up front, there was, you know, Betty Ford and other folks around this stage, et cetera, and all these cameras just swirling and zoom [swooping down] on me. You know, I just remember that moment and thinking, Ooh, God, you'd better make this good. I don't remember what I said, but it's there, parts of it anyhow, in the *Lesbian Tide*. But it's this huge picture, front and forward, and I always liked that picture. There was a real authenticity and earnestness, which I'm was sometimes laughingly teased about by friends and colleagues, of this earnestness. But it was just there.

It was a real moment of standing and speaking for, and in the context of that even a little bit, that they captured, you get me talking about all of us women gathered here together of different religious persuasions and sexual orientations and colors and races and ethnicities. It is not just about the issue of affirming lesbians. It is about affirming all of us, and you cannot affirm all of us, any one of us, you know, without affirming all of us. So, yeah, that was –

ANDERSON:

Let's back up a little bit. Ginny was talking about it — and I bring her up because this is part of the decade that you two were together — was talking about her frustrations with the feminist movement and remembering being in meetings, and she gives one anecdote of Andrea Dworkin being attacked because of her, I think, relationship with her male partner, John. And just feeling like the feminist rhetoric was very narrow and very judgmental and stuff and this had to do with sexuality. But it also had to do with race, because she's particularly referring to a real judgment around sexuality and some of the political framework of lesbianism within the feminist movement at the time. So can you just speak a little bit about — did you share those kinds of feelings? Do you remember feeling alienated from the women's movement and feeling more — I mean, you talked about places where you felt more at home, but generally, what were your feelings about feminism at the time and was that a label that you always felt comfortable in using? When a lot of black men were choosing other words to identify themselves.

POWELL: Right,

right. There are a couple of things, you know, in that question. I always felt comfortable labeling myself as and naming myself as feminist. And it very much had to do with — there was sort of a flow or

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a line, a continuum of the concept of, a term belongs to me. I get to identify myself. And it sort of flowed from — it's not exactly the same thing, but in my processing of my reality and the world, it flowed from the ability of, as African Americans, black people, to take the word "black" in, you know, in the early 60s and the mid-60s, and own it and claim it in such a way that it would never be able to hurt us, to wound us anymore. And it's the same way, you know, taking the word lesbian, taking the word dyke, but the word feminist, it's not — and sometimes it's used to wound, supposedly being used to wound, but for me, it was so important for me to own the fact that I stood for the liberation of women and for all women, and from oppression, and that was the word that I came to use. Well, enough with the language.

But it did not at all prevent me from seeing how, and experiencing how — I wouldn't call it narrow, it simply was the limitations, I guess one could say, the limitations, of feminists, white feminists, all feminists, actually, to embrace lesbianism. The fear, and you know, I described to you what was happening with women just trying to come to the National Black Feminist Organization meeting, that was real, but some of it was just this uninterrogated, uninformed, stereotyped, biased fear.

So even if the men, the boys, weren't saying anything, Betty Friedan was very aware, at that particular conference, it was a time of calling Betty Friedan to task for the kind of purging that she had done of lesbians out of NOW. And she stood up at that particular meeting and did a so-called apology. This is in Houston in 1977 [phone] —

And so that speaks volumes to how rampant, in a sense, the lesbian-baiting, the fear, the betrayal of lesbians within the feminist movement. And I was fully aware of that and had the effect of it and experiencing it, and in many different ways. But the most important piece for me, in terms of how I experienced that, was staying in there and struggling with that. That was part of, for me, the struggle of being a lesbian feminist. Part of my work was, I had to fight my sisters to have a place, to have a place as a feminist. And then, to have a place as a black woman who was a feminist. And for me, in terms of my life journey, that was my work, and that was where I stayed, and often I was alone as a black woman doing that, calling myself feminist, identifying myself as feminist, and it just — my life history was, my path did not go the way of finding some alternative naming, which was just very important for the history. That alternative — isn't even alternative, that way of being that was a contradiction other than different from, and a kind of critical reminder, critical statement, to the white feminist movement.

It's like Franz Fanon — I'm mixing a couple of things here now, that says a lot about the kind of path that is mine and my recognition of how other people do that kind of work in a different way. Franz Fanon talks about the value of the token, of tokenism, and he simply reframes it. He said, One could think of token, not as, I'm here by your grace and

da-da-da-da and I'm the only one, anything, but that the token person who is the only one can think of yourself as, I am here, not to make you feel better, or, you know, salve your conscience, but to keep you on notice that the nature of the problem has not yet been resolved. That was a piece of the way that I saw my role, but it's also a way of folks taking a different path as a way of sending a signal that it has not been resolved, so much so that I cannot even walk the same path with you. Different ways of holding that message and the information out in the culture, that just because we hold so dearly to one way of struggling against human oppression, we're not speaking to it all.

ANDERSON: Where were you looking at that time for leaders or inspiration? In terms of writing or other cultural forms, in terms of other women in the movement. Were there –

POWELL: Oh, yes. I was looking to Audre. Audre Lorde was just, she was bigger than life and she was right there for me, you know? Because I certainly lived in New York and we orbited each other's universe and life and we came right into each other and we came to know each other increasingly, and so I could be sitting in the audience and totally in awe of her on the stage or I could be in a room and she'd pull me into her lap and say, "Now, Betty Powell, when are you going to write about your life?" And I'd tell her, "Oh, right." I could not even think of it, you know, in her presence, and even as I speak, I feel how continually remiss I am in actually putting down some of my life.

ANDERSON: And where does it say that that's where you're headed?

POWELL: Yeah, yeah.

ANDERSON: That you're going to write as a lesbian feminist, and so I did wonder what happened to that.

POWELL: I did some spurts here and there of writing stuff and I have some stuff but I still have not, you know, pulled it all together, and I won't make it a negative thing, necessarily, but it's still something that I need to do in a more focused kind of way. I find this easier.

ANDERSON: It's autobiographical that you want to write –

POWELL: Yeah.

ANDERSON: or essays or –

POWELL: More autobiographical stuff, that I want to put down. And just put down, not for publishing necessarily, but to have as a record of my days, as this is in a visual verbal sense.

ANDERSON: So, Audre Lorde was a –

POWELL: So Audre Lorde was really big. And Adrienne Rich was really, you know, really big for me. And going back to some of the old voices, I mean, because we were discovering women's literature in so many different ways and so, you know, it was Zora Neale Hurston, you know, our voice was really very loud and clear for me, even Sojourner Truth, who became, for me, sort of the arch black feminist, the archetype, that was just a natural. I have a place and I claim it and don't you dare say it ain't mine. And so, there was so much women's writing that was historical and contemporary that was drawing me to them and from whom I drew lots of inspiration and courage.

ANDERSON: And so that brings me to Kitchen Table Press, a little bit ahead into the early 80s. Can we go there? Or is there something in the middle that you want to make sure that we cover?

POWELL: There's so much, I just — it seems, well, the National Black Feminist Organization.

ANDERSON: Let's talk — do you want to talk more about that organization?

POWELL: Well —

ANDERSON: It sounds like you got involved very early on and it was only three people. You –

POWELL: Well actually from those three, when I came to the first meeting, there were many people, but it was early on. But it was, you know, what we don't hear. We organized out of that organization CR groups, you know, consciousness-raising groups in every borough. And there were three or four in Brooklyn, or at least two or three in Brooklyn, and the women who led those groups and who engaged other women and really raised our — it wasn't just about raising consciousness, it was just raising your power to be, and so then folks could go out into the community and whether you were dealing with health or education or, you know, any number of fields of political engagement, et cetera, you were able to take some leadership or really participate in a way that was fuller. And so, I don't know that the story of the National Black Feminist Organization has been written. It was short-lived and very powerful in the moment that it was, because it seeded a lot of, you know, women's

powers and possibilities, et cetera, and so I just wanted to make sure that that, you know, got in.

The amount of speaking and giving voice to our claim for rights, the right to be and the right to have access to all the things that we needed to be was just — I don't know, just incredibly powerful and empowering part of my life. I was looking at some of the ways in which I did that through some posters, one that I was showing you, the black feminist speak and there we were at Yale University.

Barbara Smith and Toni Cade Bambara and myself. Spending three days on the campus and I'll tell you at the intersect of — we not only spoke in the feminist studies classes but then we spoke to the entire black student's union about black liberation. Barbara and I were both lesbians, Toni Cade not, but talking as feminist women and the rights of women within the context of the black liberation struggle and the rights of lesbians in the context of the black liberation struggle. And so, there we are on a college campus talking about this to white students, black students, women, men, da-da-da-da.

And that just kind of scene was repeated over and over and over again, whether it was in a college or university or whether it was at a program for black ex-offenders who were now in a physician's assistants program through the New School, and I'm talking to these, they were all men offenders, about the black civil rights movement and how that black struggle helped to bring them to this place and how the struggles of women was connected to that and the struggle of lesbians and gays connected to that.

So wherever I was and doing the speaking, it was — it just felt — I felt like I had the possibility of really making a difference, of having an impact on the human condition. I was very convinced and am now, always will be, that human rights are not a given, that human beings create human rights and that — I've said this many times and I just continue to believe it — it just gets deeper and deeper, so everybody has a chance, an opportunity, to contribute to that.

There are people who are leaders and I — while leader was a tag, that was a label that was given to me in a particular moment, it wasn't as leader that I necessarily saw myself then but certainly do not see myself now, in terms of what the contribution was about. I think I said to you earlier, I consider myself a foot soldier, but — and I'd never used that term until this project, in talking to you about it. It feels more concrete than the way I used to, and still will state it, which feels more metaphorical and, almost whimsical but not, but Martin Luther King used it, and I loved the notion of being a drum major for justice. And that, to me, has a kind of, seems like it has a religious fervor to it, a spiritual fervor to it. And that's how I feel my role has played out.

And I guess I want to mention a little bit about, before we get to Kitchen Table, the international dimension, because I did then move to an international arena with the lesbian feminist activism, and always

carrying the African American black liberation struggle and the struggle of the now increasingly more black people around the world. When the UN's declaration of the decade of women, starting in 1975 in Mexico — and I didn't go to Mexico but I went to — I was very much, you know, aware of it and so forth, was doing a lot of stuff here, it was 1975.

But in 1980, which was the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, I did go and went with my colleague and planned this with my colleague Charlotte Bunch. And she and I designed, in collaboration with the Women's Tribune Center, workshops on feminism. Just on feminism, period. Because it's 1980 and there was a world of women who have not even come into this. And workshops also on lesbianism and lesbian feminism, of course.

So during the course of the three weeks of this conference gave a workshop, two, almost every day, on feminism and/or lesbian feminism and there were just always lines outside. The rooms were just packed. And what spilled over in terms of always the interconnect: it was not just feminism per se and lesbianism feminism, but then I hooked into a group of African women who had actually come to me through some women from the Caribbean that we'd worked with through the Women's Tribune Center and they'd heard that, you know, Charlotte and I were — it wasn't just the fact that we were giving these workshops but that we were conversant and committed to women's empowerment in so many different ways, and this particular group of African women who were women who were in some way connected to financial institutions, either financial kinds of institutions, banks or credit unions and co-ops, but the co-ops that they were working with were co-ops of women from rural villages and, you know, that sort of thing. They came together from different countries in Africa.

During the course of this conference in the first week and into the second week, they were looking for someone to facilitate dialogue among them as to how they could, you know, well just to facilitate a dialogue amongst them about what was working for them, what was working against them, how did they see themselves? How was it difficult to stand as a woman for other women? They weren't necessarily calling themselves, you know, feminists in their various countries and how did that link into the financial and economic empowerment of women?

And ultimately, they came to me and said, "Would you facilitate this because we understand that you do this very well." And so there I am, working with these women from all over Africa around this economic development. And they know that I'm a lesbian and none of them can even begin to identify in that way, but it was that —

ANDERSON: That's really the beginning of your career as a facilitator. You're still teaching?

POWELL: Yes. I'm still teaching, I'm still teaching at that point.

ANDERSON: You're developing all these new skills that will merge all of your talents.

POWELL: And develop — exactly, exactly. Right, right.

ANDERSON: Are you're finding your work at Brooklyn College meaningful in these ways during this time? Or how is teaching for you?

POWELL: I'm finding it a split. The teaching, I love. I close my door and I work with my students and I'm loving it. I'm loving my office hours and my students, they never stop coming. But now, of course, other students are coming who've heard, oh, she's a lesbian and she's out, so I'm counseling a lot of students who are, you know, lesbian or they're feminist or they're whatever, and my students who are in language and in linguistics and education also. So I'm finding that, however, all the committee work and this and that, that academia is becoming less and less a place where I'm feeling this is really where my talents — because I came in and opened with a bang and was on the faculty council and that sort of thing. And I'm still engaged because I'm engaged in the women's studies and the women's center and that sort of thing.

But increasingly, as we're moving to '82, '83, I'm beginning to think that come '85, when I will have had 15 years in that, combined with the years that I'd already done teaching and had been in HRA and so forth, I would have a retirement of 20 [or] so years, that I would perhaps retire.

And it was always interesting that — you asked the question of how it was fitting with my life as an activist, because always now, since '72 or 3, I had been engaged as an activist while I'm teaching and what I found by the time I'm getting to the 80s, is that I'm wanting to find the quote that — it wasn't a quote but it was the way that I frame it, I wanted to find a way to have my life and my life work come together, and my life, in a sense, was the activism. My life continues always and always will be, how do I, a political person, a political life, and by political, I don't mean an elected office or appointed or anything like that, but an awareness of the human condition and your responsibility and opportunity to have some impact on that. So I wanted to find a way to have those things come together, and so retiring from the college, as you're absolutely right, I was beginning to — I had already been developing skills and of course, the skill of causing people to grow and learn and teach was, I mean, for me to teach was — that's embedded in all of that, so, yeah.

So here we are in Copenhagen and I was doing all of these wonderful — I admit there were several other groupings of folks that we were facilitating, coming together, coming together of Israeli and

Palestinian women. We were so engaged in trying to get these women to talk to each other. And I just remember going to these kind of small delegations of women and sitting for, what we would realize later, was like 45 minutes, an hour, now an hour and 15 minutes, talking, OK, so I'll come back tomorrow and we'll see if we can, you know.

So, a lot of building skills reconciling people, and in particular, women, my passion for women, their individual concerns and issues being addressed and how could I support it, but where we needed to connect also across the most difficult kinds of barriers and chasms. I saw possibilities. And I certainly had only believed that me, being in the position of making the connection between my own selves and always standing for the wholeness of me with all these pieces, and being in the context of the lesbian movement, the progressive lesbian movement that again, had to be challenged around its whiteness and how do we build bridges in the feminist movement and challenging all of that.

So all of that, even where it wasn't visibly "successful" that I was able to, like, OK, so because I was there, then there were ten more black women or ten more women of color that got integrated in that — it wasn't as much always about just that as it was about holding up, well, as Franz Fanon said, that the nature of this problem has not been resolved and so we will keep it ever present in our consciousness and your consciousness and whatever. And sometimes, often, actually, different kinds of projects, the point was to actually increase numbers or effectuate a policy and so forth that made a difference in who was present and who had power and who has access to decision-making and all that sort of thing.

So the international piece expanded, more conferences, more international conferences. Another poster that I have there is an '83 — Charlotte and I went to Lima, Peru, for the — it was then the second feminist conference Encuentro Feminista Latina y del Caribe of Latin America and the Caribbean and there, again, it was no escaping, even in Peru, in Lima, I found myself working with other women to organize a black women's caucus, you know, an antiracism caucus within the Encuentro where they were expecting 200-300 women, 600 women showed up at this conference. It was again, this time of, you know, what was happening for us in the 70s, here it was the 80s and it was happening now for women around the world in different places and so, this energy and excitement of possibilities opening up for women coming from everywhere and in the context of that, having to really struggle with race and racism.

I mean, racism hit me smack in the face on the first day in Lima. We go into a bank to change our traveler's checks, and Charlotte went through like a breeze and they asked for one piece of ID and my passport wasn't quite right and I had already by mistake signed the top of the traveler's check before and so that became a big thing and it was just — so by the time I get to the conference, I'm like, and I'm hearing

stories of the women from Brazil, or the black women who live in Peru, I'm going, OK, yeah, I get it.

ANDERSON: And you were able to facilitate –

POWELL: Able to facilitate and actually, my spoken Spanish — Spanish is not — my listening and comprehension is pretty good but the passion would lead you, so I was speaking in my broken Spanish and I'm facilitating in a little French (both voices) exactly and so, a little French, a little Spanish and, and some translation, whatever. And then, of course, so that's that. And then, of course, we're into the second week and here I am with my head together with the Latina Gringas because they are like Puerto Rican women from New York and Connecticut and other places who also come to this conference who are all lesbian. Charlotte and myself, and others and a couple of folks who we had met in Copenhagen from Mexico, Claudia Hinajosa and Virginia Sanchez Vicario, we're all lesbians putting our heads together going, OK, well you know, we're going to have to have a lesbian caucus here.

ANDERSON: Again.

POWELL: Again, again! But we know, now, how to do this, and so we organize the lesbian caucus and we're having a speak-out in what was — because it was in this very rustic kind of country club thing that they were able to get space and spread out and so forth, that we took over this place, so this was supposedly the bar. It was a small little thing and it held maybe about 50-60 people, started out less than that and grew and grew and grew. The crowd started coming outside the door, and before we knew it, we had to transfer it to the room of the plenary and over it, ultimately, over half of the conference ended up in that room and there were women who came and it was the first coming out in Latin America of women publicly around this and then organizing themselves around the lesbian issues.

And the ways in which they had been organizing women in the favelas doing, again, economic development, economic empowerment, working with violence, and all that sort of thing. At that conference, women were able to say that women were trying to come to them with issues around their love for other women and lesbians which they couldn't even hear and they didn't even know had language to talk to them about and so then we, as happened with all these conferences, then we were requested, could you have a workshop with us to help us to know how to talk to women about that. Help us to know how to wed the lesbianism and the feminism.

And then it went on terms of the international — we'll need to bring it to a close. Ultimately, my last work that I've been doing internationally has been working with a group called Women Living

Under Muslim Laws. It's been almost five years now since I've done that work around this, but you heard earlier, it's when I just got a call from one of the women that I connected with, so I did work in Turkey and did work in Nigeria with women who are just fiercely committed to being Muslim, or affirming women who are Muslim in their country [and protecting rights of women not Muslim but living in Muslim countries.] But working from a legal point of view as well as from the political theological point of view. A feminist, to reinterpret the Koran and to rewrite it in ways that makes sense, you know, for women. I mean, [not] rewrite it, but reinterpret.

But in that context, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, I do a diversity workshop that have them looking at race, class, because when they came to me, I said, "Wait a minute. What do you want me to work with you about?" At that time, they were coming to me because, you know, you facilitate around all the oppressions and this diversity stuff, and I go, yeah, what do you want and what are your issues, and they go, well, class and race [laughs] and gender in terms of internalized sexism and so forth, and so I find myself in Turkey working with women who come from Israel, Israeli women and Palestinian women who have to deal with each other, or women in Nigeria who have to deal with the religion. And so the carrying the work in those ways has been a very important part of how the lesbian feminism work evolved to just embracing the spectrum of human difference from my perspective as a black woman who is a feminist who is a lesbian who is a humanist who is a person who fused my right and my responsibility and some capacity to make a contribution.

ANDERSON: We'll pause there.

POWELL: Yeah.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ANDERSON: (both voices) So we'll probably interrupt at 30 minutes if we feel we're not going to get to it, but let's spend a few minutes first talking about Salsa Soul Sisters, I think that comes first in the chronology, in the late 70s. So just tell me about your moment with that organization –

POWELL: It was very much at the inception, and that's it. Salsa Soul, which is now African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change — just a wonderful evolution. But it really grew out of that intense work talking about in the 70s where I'm with, you know, from GAU to NGTF to Lesbian Feminists Liberation — I didn't mention. It's not that I was directly connected with that, but I was always a part of that. They are here in New York and they were always calling on me to do this or that or help with this conference or whatever, various and sundry things. But Lesbian Feminists Liberation was a very critical piece.

And I mention that because there were then maybe, like, 10-12 organizations in and around New York at this time. So what time are we talking? You know, I lose track of the exact dates, so it's mid-70s, '74, '75, and we're making ourselves visible, that folks start coming to us.

So Channel 13, PBS, you know, came to the lesbian-gay community and said, "We'd like you to have, like, a three-hour time to be able to just show what you're doing. You know, who's who? What's happening in the gay community?" I say lesbian-gay community in New York City. So all these organizations got together. This guy, Crane Davis, I'll never forget, came from PBS and interviewed over a period of months, talked to the different organizations and organized this program.

It was a three-hour marathon on PBS with phone-in and phone banks and the whole thing, and we did everything, from the political, you know, presentations and panels and theatrical pieces — I remember Ginny wanting — she's such a ham in a wonderful way. That not only was she doing her political stuff but she wanted to be a part of a little dramatic piece. So there was some theater stuff that happened. It was an amazing range of looking at the lesbian-gay community as it was configured at the time. The state of that was, as we've referenced earlier, lacking in many black folk. I was often the only one or, again, if not the only one, one among, you know, few, but in terms of in the visible movement, it wasn't that black and Latino lesbian-gay folks weren't, sort of, meeting and connecting and slowly moving into more political expressions themselves.

But at that moment, among the phone call-ins were a couple of different people who were calling and saying, "Where are black lesbians? Where are they meeting? Where are their organizations?" et cetera, et cetera. And so, I guess after two or three of these calls, the phone-bank people, you know, tapped me and — I always want to say Renee McCoy — it's not Renee McCoy — oh, historically I want to be

able to put her name out. She was a minister in Metropolitan Community Church. So anyhow, the two of us were the two black women who were on and so they called us to the phone to actually speak with one of the black women and I'm speaking with her and she's saying, you know, I just wish there was some place we could come together and da-da-da-da. So this woman and I put our heads together and said, "What can we do? Let's have a meeting some place." And I'm asking her, "Where can we meet?" And because she was a part of Metropolitan Community Church, housed at 13th Street and 7th Avenue, she said, "Well, I'm sure we can meet at the church." So we literally wrote out a sign, you know, "Black lesbians will meet at the Metropolitan Community Church on Thursday evening at 7 p.m. Here's the phone number" — and held it up on Channel 13 and said, this is where we'll meet.

And that was the genesis of Salsa Soul. There were maybe seven, eight women who came to that first meeting. And in that first meeting, it was put out really very strongly, you know, what do women want? Do you want a political space or social space? I mean, there were many kind of nuances around that, but in essence, those were the two things. And it came down really hard. We just need a social space. We need some place where we can come down from Harlem to not have to go the bars. And I was saying, "That's really great."

And we met a second time and I met. The second time, more women came and it was very clear and I said, "I can't really — not I can't, but I'm not choosing to put my energies into creating a social space. Can we do political stuff?" and the women were saying, "No, we don't want to do political stuff." And there was some feeling that was really very clear and right on point that this gay movement and the political stuff, that's the white kids, they can do that. We just need to organize our — not organize, but really nurture and cultivate a space for black women to come and be. And so I said, you know, "That's great." And I said in that moment, very inarticulately but I was thinking it more clearly of course, as time went on, that there could be nothing more political than black lesbians coming together in a social space. And I remember not wanting to emphasize that a lot as if to say, "Well, you're being political anyhow." [laughs] So I didn't go there.

And I said, "Well, I'm probably not going to be heavily engaged with this." Again, it was a very hard decision to make, because I felt myself, like, "Jesus Christ, Betty Jean, you're just so serious. You've missed out on the civil rights movement. You go, I'm the only one and now you're going to, like, not do this?" And I'm thinking, but if you're not going to really march and demonstrate and go to City Hall and fight for — it's like, that's the urgency I was feeling. And there really was, I can go to my grave saying, that was not a judgment about — and if you're not going to do that, you're not — I was just very clear that that's really important work to do. But between teaching and doing — I

was then, like, just lined up in a lot of political stuff and was always being called to speak and was traveling to Ohio, to Milwaukee, to wherever, wherever, to organize and speak.

So that was my relationship with Salsa Soul, in sort of this launching and then a blessing, and many people have no idea that I was even a part of it, because it went on to become just this, you know, incredible force and power and place of strength and whatever for black women and mixed women and biracial women and some Latina women and it was just powerful.

There were a couple of times when I went back to speak. There were a couple of times that I actually went to meetings because of, you know, something that was happening. Audre was going to be there, would you come and speak with me, or do whatever? And the one time that I was actually asked to come and speak because there was someplace that I had done a presentation to women and Salsa Sol wanted to have that particular kind of presentation, saying nobody could do it but you. It was, like, a real affirmation of, I do have something, you know, to contribute and to give to this group.

And it's so interesting that today, as it has mutated into African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change and is a very different organization in terms of that, as so many of the organizations that emerged then do not have that same energy and power and potential, et cetera, Salsa Soul does a Thursday, I mean, AALUSC, African Ancestral, does a Thursday night program that is always attended because women are always hungry to just come together and so it is a different iteration of the social space but does a lot of political, or at least awareness kinds of things, but is struggling right now, in terms of trying to find its voice, its face, its whatever, and I am doing some of the organizational dynamics work with them, working with their board, working with their leadership and some coaching and stuff.

ANDERSON: It's a nice full circle.

POWELL: Yes, it is. It is very interesting. So that's Salsa.

Astraea. The Astraea Foundation then is my feminist iteration but clearly the lesbian, you know, connection. The genesis of Astraea is 1977, early '77, so again we're in this time of incredible awareness on the part of women, of everything woman and so forth. The information that's coming out, that's emerging, newspaper articles and journals and stuff, about the funding of the resources for women's efforts and projects and girls' development and so forth, and this particular little fact emerges. Somebody has done research on the moneys and foundations and where they go in US North America and the concluding data was that one tenth of one percent of all funding that is given out in any given year in US goes to women and girls' projects.

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So armed with that little fact, two good friends, Nancy Dean and Beva Eastman had a dinner at their house in City Island. And there were about twenty women who came, and the evening was to discuss the question, Is there a need for a women's foundation? And not that there weren't a few, you know, around, but that was the big question. And so we sat in their living room and, you know, discussed and discussed and discussed. And finally, there were some of us who said, "Absolutely and we want to do this." Maybe about ten, not even.

And so we met again and — but we were all lesbians. And we said, "Yes, there is a need for a women's foundation. And we will fund — this foundation should fund women's projects. We are not going to be a foundation that's going to have a lot of money" and I don't know [who] coined the phrase but our vision was, We're funding women's efforts that are — not have a leg up but it's like chin on curbstone [laughs] so we can give them \$300 or \$500 or \$1000 and it would make, you know, it's be like a \$250,000 gift or whatever.

So, I mean, we hadn't actually gotten to all of that in the first meetings but we got a sense of — we were going to fund women where women were in terms of needing the resources. Whether it's the National Congress of Neighborhood Women or it was, you know, a lesbian group that's trying to organize around, you know, violence against women but there were lesbians who were doing this and so forth.

And then we were clear that it had to be — the priority had to be given to women of color, lesbians and women who — working class. That class had to be working class, working poor, or poor women, and women with disabilities. So those were the categories of women that we were particularly looking at, the women who were the most disenfranchised.

And it took us actually almost two years of planning and doing the bylaws. The bylaws weren't the thing because the bylaws were our way of thinking through our ideology and our philosophy and the possibilities for the moneys. We actually stopped, halted in mid-stream, not mid-stream, actually, it was probably maybe into six months, and looked around, with me pushing this but not me pushing it alone, phooh. As Nancy Dean would say, "We're talking the multi-multi — because multicultural now is the whole thing there — but we ain't walking it. Look around the room." The ten of us, I think, there were two of us, then, who were women of color. All lesbians, but no women of color. And we said, no, we have to stop this and we will not come back until we're half, we're fifty-fifty, and that it's not just going to be, you know, the women of color who have to do it, the black women who have to do it. Each of us has to bring somebody. And so we came back there. It was only a couple of months that it took us and we came back together and we had then, you know, Gwendolyn Rogers and Joyce Hunter and, you know, just really —

It has been, for me, probably the most successful attempt that I was engaged in, in making real the political belief, the political commitment, to racial parity inclusion from the jump. You know, who's at the table but who has the voice in shaping the very form of the organization and the decision making and the opening of access. So that was a very important piece. And it is successful — I guess I swell with pride to look at Astraea today, 25 years later, 25-plus, you know, going into it, and really continuing to live that reality.

As I talk with Katherine Acey, who is now the executive director, and Katherine will say, "You know, there are times when we don't look like this perfect, you know, mix because depending on the times over 25 years, there are moments when it looks, like, Oh, my God, they're all Hispanic — and people will say Hispanic and not even Latino. Or, you know, they're all black, even when there are a significant number of white people, because of our perceptions, if you see at least 50 percent, or even 30 or 40 percent of women of color, it looks like, you know, they've totally taken over.

And one group or the other, sometimes even women of color have looked and said, like, they're not really including black women because if they're all Hispanic or they're not really including Hispanic women and Latino women because they're all black. So the visual, the public perception, has always sort of gone by what it sees visually. The philosophy has been to really have that inclusion be meaningful but people come and go and the transition and as you get that movement and that change sometimes, it looks more, but it's always held to the principle —

ANDERSON: How did you conceive that you all could raise that amount of money to become a foundation? What's your strategy for being able to really implement this goal?

POWELL: Well, part of it was the fact that Nancy Dean and Beverly Eastman themselves were women of wealth, some, you know, inherited wealth, and Beverly Eastman sat on — now, Beva's not a part of the Astraea Foundation because Beverly sat on a family fund, the Eastman Fund, which was, you know, a deep frustration for her, trying to convince her father and her brothers and, you know, in various and sundry, male relatives in particular, to fund women's projects, to fund lesbian projects, to fund, you know, projects, well, in terms of class stuff, they really were pretty good on that, and to fund those intersections. So her support, Beva's support of Astraea which really was, you know, in that household, the two of them, Nancy really was, you know, the guiding force of Astraea.

Their commitment was important in terms of us having a sense of possibility of raising the moneys. Not only that they, you know, gave huge amounts of their money, although they certainly did, but they had

access to certain women. And, in the process of having done a lot of benefits, Ginny and I were very clear that — and, I mean, Ginny was not a part of the organization, but through our lives together, and other women that we knew who held benefits for any number of feminist enterprises and lesbian enterprises and lesbian-gay enterprises, that five dollars from, you know, a woman who was just earning her \$20,000 a year and that was big in those days, \$30,000 a year, multiplied by many, could do it.

So there was yes, the deep concern and commitment on the part of a couple of women there who then multiplied over a few times, more of women who had some access, you know, to wealth and could connect with other women, but also a grand continuum. Because on the board, it was critical for us to have working-class women, or women who were from the working-class background, you know, working middle-class background, but everyone, it was a big thing with us.

I mean we took it to the point of the ridiculous, but it was a very important concept, that everyone, and I know that I was the one that threw this in the hopper because it comes from my, you know, AME black church background, the notion of being a steward. That we all could have stewardship over the building of our institutions and just as in black church, you put a dollar in the envelope, you put three dollars in the envelope, and we knew that even then, 70s and 60s, how much black churches raised and the moneys from maids and chauffeurs and whatever. So that was also informing our, in terms of possibility, that spilled over, not just through Betty Powell but through a movement that took, not only from the civil rights movement, our strategies and tactics and the black civil rights movement, but some sense of the black culture's possibilities, even when people did not know explicitly that they were drawing on some of those possibilities. So that was it.

And when I say, taking it to the ridiculous, when we talk about stewardship over funds, we posited at some point that we wanted to have every single lesbian, certainly in the New York metropolitan area, have the possibility of contributing to *Astraea*. So you could pledge, you know, like, \$25 dollars a year, or you could pledge, I think we went down to \$10, and you could send it in by, like, 25 cents if you wanted to. I mean, we were just ridiculous. I don't know that you're old enough, but when the March of Dimes card — you know, the things you opened and you put the little dimes in? We really conceived, like, how we should have one of those and give them out to people, where you stick a quarter in or a dime in and you just fill it up and then just mail it in to *Astraea*.

But the concept — so when you ask that, all of this is coming from that question, how did we conceive. It was already a seed that was there of the notion of, Oh, yes, we can do this, and that seed grew and grew and as we talked it and yet more and more, the possibility of, of course, we can raise this money.

ANDERSON: And you did.

POWELL: Yep, and we did. So Astraea was — ah, it was just critical.

ANDERSON: Did you remain a board member for —

POWELL: Eight years, eight years. And so, we did — everything from the first brochures, the first — even still, they maintain that image of those three, you know, heads and Nancy Johnson, MJ Graphics, was the lesbian who did our first thing and I was the liaison. We each had — it was a working board, clearly. We all had to work very hard to do that. So I was the media liaison and so our new printing of our brochures and our newsletter and designing our logos and all that sort of thing was a part of something I was directly engaged in and then just the raising of money, the asking, the holding out our hands and our hats and our whatever.

As well as the whole thing of me speaking and so, our programs. One of our, oh, I think I have that poster somewhere, “In Conversations,” oh, it was Audre and Adrienne Rich in dialogue at Hunter College, and that was filled to the rafters, and I moderated that and it was an Astraea benefit kind of thing. So there were many of those where, then, my skills, the orator, and so forth, was at the service of Astraea.

And we reached out and we really, early on, just were having that kind of impact that we wanted in terms of letting women know that this chin on curbstone and that you were the one we wanted.

So, we got an application — this is just one example and then I’ll move on — we got an application from a group of women from Vermont who were working-class women returning to school, and they didn’t feel at home in the young-people college and they just wanted — they had gotten a room for themselves that they could come to and they needed moneys to buy books, because all the women couldn’t buy extra books that they wanted to read, so they wanted to stock it so they’d have a library and women could — all kinds of stuff like that that they wanted to do. And so we read the application and we said, yeah, these are all white women and they’re all straight, as far as we knew. So we write back and we say to them, you know — we hadn’t denied the application, but you know, Do you have any women of color that you’re [laughs] —

ANDERSON: That’s what we want!

POWELL: You’ve totally got it. [laughs] You know what I’m trying to say? Like, look around and so forth. They write back and they say, “We’re very sorry but there are very few women of color in the Northeast Kingdom

of Vermont. But we're all working class and some really working-poor women who are not — so we're trying to get our education. Could you please help us." And we said, "Oh, yes, of course. You're what we're looking for." But they had — they wrote about how they would be, but that they didn't take that as an excuse when they said there were very few. They said, "But we know that there are probably some women of color who would like to have the opportunity that we're having." It was just the most touching and so affirming of our philosophy and our belief trying to put it out there in the world and having dialogue with people that we could engage around that.

ANDERSON: And no place else for them to go.

POWELL: Yeah, and no place else for them to go to get \$1000 to do this stuff and then, I remember saying, we funded them a second time, and they were, at one point, we had some of our fundees come to New York and be a part of a celebration. We were five years into our thing, and that was one of the groups that also came to New York. OK.

ANDERSON: So, do you want to talk about Kitchen Table? Because that's sort of at the end of — you got a paid position at (both voices)

POWELL: Yes. Kitchen Table was — I'm just at the end of my teaching into retiring and the transition into my — so, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press was a natural kind of place for me to go. Barbara Smith and I had had a connection in the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, and the importance of the written word as a tool of our liberation, all of us — black, lesbian, gay, feminist and so forth — was really very clear. Seeing that come together in a women's press publishing company that was founded by black Latina and Latina women. It was Barbara and Audre and Cherrie Moraga and there was one other. I don't know if Gloria Anzaldua, may she rest in peace, was an integral part of that at the time.

It was just phenomenal to know how important the written word was. And then how important it was that women of color get to have some control over and influence and nurturing over whose written word. And then, what disposition to carry that word, you know, to the world, and so to be the sort of general administrator at a time that was very challenging for it — and the press has always had very challenging times — was an honor for me and a challenge, one which, to tell history straight, I did not rise to in every way. It was a very hard managerial thing to do and there were ways in which I was over my head.

ANDERSON: You're really getting it off the ground.

POWELL: Yeah, well, I mean, it had gotten off the ground. Liftoff was already there. And then it was, like, ohh, just about, and I think I was able to whooh, kind of get just about there, till, you know, however, it soared a little bit. I know that I made a contribution. I also know that my contribution could've been greater if my skills sets had been just more there. I'd never been in publishing in any way, form, or fashion. And certainly not in managing or financial managing. But be that as a way not to excuse too much, but to say, the experience, oh, my.

To be able to take books to a conference and these were Kitchen Table Women of Color books and spread them out, you know, with such pride. And people just gravitate to the Kitchen Table Press. I mean, usually these are, again, your progressive feminists who really know how important it is that these books are out here and published by Kitchen Table. And to take these books to the Encuentro Feminista Latina y del Caribe. Some in English — did we have any in Spanish at that time? I don't think we had any in Spanish at that time, but of course, the world being what it is, so many people do speak English as opposed to us, you know, speaking their language. But the appreciation of books by, you know, Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga and Amy — not Amy Tan but Joy Thompson. Joy Thompson, Joy, oh, Joy Harjo, and you know, you just Chrystos and, mmmmm.

ANDERSON: Did you get to play any role in deciding what got published?

POWELL: Um .

ANDERSON: Do you remember those conversations?

POWELL: I'm trying to remember the conversations. To a minimal degree. I think I always felt that the input was significant and that it was sufficient to my knowledge and my — but I had a lot of conversation and input around how we did, you know, the publishing and how we did the promoting and to whom, and I did grow in my knowledge and understanding as, you know, I was there and have a little more input into, oh, yeah, and go here. So that's the kind of, like, pushing it up. I was able to yes, there and, oh, in this contact. And then my ability to just connect with people and do that kind of thing, was really, that was a lot of the contribution, the input, and their connection with knowing somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody else and then, Oh, yeah, we can get the books here and we can get the books there.

ANDERSON: What were the dynamics like amongst the collective?

POWELL: Actually, by the time I'm really into it and doing it, most of the collective had fallen away in that people had, you know, Barbara had moved to Albany. Cherrie had gone to California. Audre was here but

not involved to that degree. So it was basically running the operation by myself in terms of the collective but certainly — I mean, Barbara was running the operation, Barbara Smith as the really, the last of the collective that was committed to it and stayed committed. So in terms of running it, she was the writer, the publisher, et cetera, and I the administrator, but very much in dialogue, you know, with her, and then the numerous young women who came through including Anni [Cammett], whom you know, who was a designer at that time, graphics designer, and just did so many of the covers and the fliers and the promotional pieces for us and so forth and she was all of, I don't know, 20 or something at the time. And they all came through the door and Rosie — ah, Rosie will kill me for forgetting her last name. Oh, such a smart young Chicana — woman from California, here for graduate studies, ended up doing her Ph.D. — who was the computer [tech person], so bringing the element of technology, but they — just the numerous women who came in, all young women, to volunteer for packing the books and billing the books, and, oh.

The collective became these women who were just so inspired by the notion of Kitchen Table. And they came from, again, they were computer tech people or they came from the telephone company or they worked with the Department of Health and so forth. Or were graphics designers, like Annie, and What can I do for Kitchen Table Press? And so the coordinating and orchestrating of those young women's input was the task and the joy and the opportunity and the challenge that I had.

ANDERSON: Where were you all set up?

POWELL: We were set up in the Central Presbyterian Church, in the basement on Park Avenue and 50-something, 64th, the most unlikely place, but it had had this reputation for opening up to — and there was a — oh, what was it? It was a women's — was it a domestic violence anti-violence women's group? They, too, will kill me for not remembering their name, who were also housed in that same basement. So, that was where we were.

ANDERSON: So you were there just a couple of years?

POWELL: Not even like a year and a half, you know, kind of thing. But it seemed like a very long time. It had a lifetime aspect to it. It was an activist's moment that had a kind of lifetime sense of it. Because we — I mean, we did so many book fairs and conferences and whatever. It just was a constant thing. Year, 18 months or so.

ANDERSON: And you left to take on [both voices] —

POWELL:

I left as — the thing is that I was not so much — again, I'm looking for that way for my life and my life work to come together. This is a piece of it. But I knew that this wasn't absolutely it. I, in the meantime, had submitted a proposal to the Ms. Foundation to work on a project that ultimately ended up becoming the lesbian-gay working group, the funding group, that looked at how much funds, so I guess I really thought that I was going to end up doing social change foundation work. And so we were looking at how much funding goes to lesbian-gay organizations.

And the person that got that contract with me through Ms. Foundation was a woman Winnie Deloayza, who had her own management consulting firm. And in working together with her, Winnie said, "You know, you really should come and work with me. You're really great at this kind of thing." Because we had to go out and work with groups and talk to them and facilitate them giving us the information, and so forth. And I thought, "I don't think I left Brooklyn College to become a consultant." A consultant in those days was like a shoe salesman, like, please. [laughs] My friends would laugh me out of, whatever, out of the movement.

But Winnie said, "No. Look, I know this is not exactly what you want, but, you know, I can teach you some skills that I think will be very helpful to you and when you do find what you want, you'll go for it and you'll just" — so I ended up hooking in with her and it was clearly, again, a path that I should take because I learned, oh, everything from strategic planning to communications and negotiations, facilitating what was called interagency cooperation, which was a part of cross-cultural stuff that was beginning to happen, and all manner of organizational dynamics stuff.

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Ended up moving to just outside of Albany where she lived in Altima, and we did a lot of work with state agencies at the time, the Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Children and Families — so there were some ways in which the knowledge and understanding that I had, not only from my activist's work and analysis of gender and race and class and sexual orientation, et cetera, but the work that I had begun way back in Harlem with, you know, the youth and the women and — the way it carried on.

It seemed like there was this line, the trajectory that then brought me into these agencies who were working with the problems of — that were created by the oppressions that people were suffering. So the work began to make a lot of sense for me. Yet knowing still that it was not the work. This was '86.

By '89, three years into that, it just broke open, with an incident, literally, at the University of Massachusetts where I — you know, hearing the news of the clash between the black students and white students, I said to Winnie, "You know, these folks really need some training" — meaning, because the deans and the various officials in the

college and the students didn't know at all how to handle this and it just turned out so badly and so ugly. And to hear coming out my mouth that they needed training and this was going to be my work [laughs].

Well, I went to the Equity Institute, which is a group that we had funded way back in Astraea and I recalled that they did all of this work with training folks around racism and sexism, anti-Semitism and so forth. So I did the training with them. I became an integral part of that organization which did a lot of diversity work and, now on their board and worked with them and pretty soon, folks were calling me, the office of Deloayza Associates and asking for me and both Winnie and I looked at each other and we knew this was the time that I would start my own organization.

So thus was born Betty Powell Associates. That was organizational development work with a focus on anti-oppression diversity. And that has taken me over the last, what 13, 14 years into the field of consulting, coaching, training. You were right to say, that actual skills sets around the facilitating, the training, was beginning in those conferences, in particular the international conferences where I was facilitating dialogue in cross-cultural reconciliations, et cetera. And of course I then began and continue the self-development and my own professional development and things.

So I've gone to so many courses and, you know, three-week and four-week, in the woods and learning, you know, all of these skills around human dynamics and human growth and development, as well as very focused on deepening of my knowledge and my understanding of the oppressions that I didn't — I had knowledge, I'm saying, but I didn't have to have a lot to get on my soapboxes and do my activism and so forth, but even that was teaching me.

But I have been very consciously and continue to do the deepening and the understanding of the oppressions, in particular racism, classism, and the intersect of that, and that actually is where my work is now. I mean, I have over these years been working in not-for-profit and community groups, and public institutions and hospitals and police departments and universities and colleges and schools and faith-based groups and, you know, you just name it. And increasingly, my focus has been race and anti-racism work and to me, it comes full circle from Miami and where my passion is and where my pain is and where my despair and my hope is. And it's not that that's the only work I do but my best work, my most focused work.

I've developed, over the last eight years now, with a friend, we developed a Racial Justice Institute. Joan Olson. It really is out of her shop, the Cultural Bridges Shop, that we've developed it together. Where we design a three-day, community-based racial justice awareness to action, design and workshops. There's a Part I and we do a Part II, the same thing, three-day, you know, continuing, deepening awareness, and moving to more intense action. We do these using YWCAs as the

host, you know, organizing entity that pulls in people from in and around a community area and it can be a larger area than just that city, you know, from health entities and educational things and the school board and the banks and this and that. So that's a big, big piece for me and it is really the focus of my work.

ANDERSON: What's changed in doing this work over the last 15 years, in terms of the clients that call you and the kinds of conflicts or struggles that they're asking you to help with? Because the conversations about race, of course, have changed a lot in the last 15 years. You got this amazing window into the kinds of dialogue that's happening on all sorts of levels in all sorts of communities. So what kind of shift for you has happened in those 15 years?

POWELL: What I see is that in some way, there's always going to be groups and pockets and communities of folk who are starting at ground zero in a sense of sort of basic awareness, and it sort of amazes you, like, duh? But in this intensely racialized society, you know, new people coming along the time, there's always a way of doing, you know, racism 101. And so, there's a call for that, still. I don't do a lot of it.

So in the Racial Justice Institute, you will find that people are at different levels, so we're trying to play to the racism 101 and the graduate-level folk who are doing it. So, there's a call for that within organizations. There are organizations that have already done, they feel the kind of basic 101 awareness, but they are continually having turnover of people, so they need to redo that and redo that and redo that. But there are organizations who are also at a level where they know that we've got to more than just, you know, add some and stir and mix.

The access has got to be more to not just getting people in, but getting people up in those places of decision making and really have some impact in shaping, a real stakeholder. I would say there are not a lot of organizations that have that, but those are the organizations that I'm focusing on now more, because there is where you can engage people around, This is not about just some training and a one-day, two-day, or even a three-day thing: this is a long-term commitment.

And so, I am into and can see that there are people who will engage — not more quickly, but there's more potential than not at that level, which is not, you know, very high, of people who can hear me, hear my colleagues who say, "This has got to be a long-term commitment." Or come already, saying, "We've got to do something that's really long-term and sustained." And so, now, I'm doing racial justice initiatives, long-term, race-gender initiatives.

If I had the phones ringing off the hook or even once every quarter, I've got a good solid two or three calls that are at that level, I could say that we really are into a change, if that's the pattern. [But] it's not even enough to say it's a pattern. It's where I target my work and keep kind

of pushing people up, encouraging them to that in the organizational context.

The hope is there but it's so contingent in the organization on who's in power, the leadership. Is the leadership the ones who are really asking for this or is it someone beneath, below them in power in the organization? And power is the word, is the key word — is the power to really institutionalize a commitment to racial justice and racial inclusion? And if you're not talking to the top folk, you get the frustration there, you know. So the work there has some hope built in it and some, you know, great despair.

But I can never stay in the despair place. I go there and I don't negate [that]. So part of what I'm doing now is trying to create my own Racial Justice Institutes that are long-term and in the community and that is not dependent on an organization, the leaders and so forth. So at this very moment, as a matter of fact, when you leave, my next work today is meeting with a colleague and I who had been designing a two-year Brooklyn Community Racial Justice Leadership Institute, and we're trying to get funding. We will be the ones who are funded to do this. We want a partnership, collaborate with the YWCA here but it's not, like, it's in the YWCA. It's us being funded to do this to get folk [phone]. We're wanting to get a commitment from people who are in their lived life and their work in the borough of Brooklyn from health and hospitals, from the education institutions, whether it's the PTA president — we want people who consider themselves leaders. So it's someone who lives right here on this block and is on welfare and is, you know, really pretty vocal and pretty engaged around justice, and the interconnect is always going to be there in terms of class and race and gender.

And so, it's race and class in particular that we're looking at and we want to get people who can commit themselves for two years to engage in, yes, deepening awareness but more than anything, building networks of people who care about race and racial justice and race inclusion, and have some ability or capacity to bring back what it is that they know and they learned their skill sets and facilities and a really fully evolved plan of action to impact their institution in their part of the community and we feel — and there's going to be so many components to it.

But I'm at this point in my life where I know I've made some contribution and it's like, it's not enough. It's just not enough. And I'm just bound and determined to have even more impact and in particular around the issue of race and race inclusion. White-dominant societies have just got to go! And I know in my lifetime I won't see that end, but I — just to keep absolutely pounding away at the world's repression, to knock them down. And in the process, not just working against those walls, but just by virtue of engaging other people in some empowered ways of doing that, that we really affirm the dignity of those people who have been so oppressed. My people. And other folks of color who've

been so oppressed by this so wrong-headed, you know, totally anti-life notion of racial superiority.

So I began with tears, we end with some emotion. But that is me. That is the feeling that I have around this, is that I have not nearly begun. I have begun, but I have not nearly finished. I am not yet finished. I am not yet done.

ANDERSON: In sort of summation, because we only have a few minutes left, what would you say has changed about the political vision that you started with as an activist thirty years ago and where it's come?

POWELL: Phew.

ANDERSON: Is it much different?

POWELL: It is and it isn't. There was this very naïve conviction that we can change it, we can change the world, and there was the reality of the nature of how oppressions and discrimination and so forth are organized and the ways in which we're at the effect of the oppression in different ways, based on where we're located by class, color, race, et cetera. And just dealing with, say, feminism, that it changes for some people faster than others. It changed for white women. Affirmative action for white women has been very successful. Affirmative action for blacks and other people of color has been successful for those who it's been successful [for] but the concept of — I mean, most people don't even link affirmative action with women and the rise of white women through the ranks, not that that's done and not that women have no obstacles, or whatever —

And I'm saying whatever, in the sense of, my god, it's so big, some of the stuff that white women face as well as all other women, so not as to say — but that that's the way in which that change has occurred for some, not only for women in general and white women in particular, that it looks different than it does for black men, women, and children, or brown men, women and children. It looks very different in terms of the progress. Not that there's been no progress. The progress even that gays have made, lesbian and gay people, I rejoice. I want to rejoice, probably even more than I really fully can bring myself to rejoice about the marriage piece and the fact that, I mean, you look on that mantelpiece. That little baby up there is the product of two of my lesbian friends, you know. Michaela would not be in my life if there had not been this growth and change, that lesbians can adopt, can have their own children.

So my vision of what's possible by us struggling and standing in witness against the madness is borne out by so much change that has occurred. What has changed is my clear-eyed gaze on how far the prize is for black people in this country. Even with — not even just the same amount of struggle, even more struggle. And the prize remains. So it

informs me that I just have to keep fighting. We all have to keep fighting. We have to keep struggling. So it can inform me that, you know, phht, throw up your hands and we're never going to get it, and I know there are times when I want to say it, we're never going to have our freedom, we're never going to really be, you know, liberated from a yoke of real — I mean, holding us down, and we could do a whole other tape of my understandings and my analysis of politically economically and very systemic ways that the wheels, the mechanisms of racial oppression just turning every moment, every moment, and being kept in place, very well kept in place. So that determined, seemingly immovable, implacable American racism is just that. Is just that. Seemingly immovable, implacable, and in real ways, certainly are. But not something that cannot be struggled against and continually with some piece of our eye on the prize [laughs].

We have to keep a lot of the eye on that system and how we can figure out to work it and then there's a whole other, you know, subject, a whole discourse that I could do on the work that I see to be done with — and I will go to not just people of color in general as I have at other moments in this filming but to talk, just the work that I see has to be done with black people around internalized racism, which is one of the strong pillars of the two pillars that Barbara Love talks about, that holds up the racist oppression, is the constructed racism and the internalized racism. A hard piece, a hard piece to broach the subject with folks of color or with any group that's targeted. Internalized sexism, internalized homophobia.

But that's part of my work in the Racial Justice Institutes and it's a big part of the work in the three-day ones that I already do and it's a big part of the work that I see in this Community Racial Justice Leadership Institute that we're designing. That's a piece of the battle, the struggle, that I think needs a lot of creativity and a lot of energy and a lot of real smart work around. But the [struggle against] the constructed racism, likewise, needs to continue. And so we go on, as we must.

ANDERSON: We're out of time. Is it OK if we end here?

POWELL: That's fine. That's good.

END TAPE 5

Transcribed by Luanne Jette.

Audited for accuracy and clarity by Revan Schendler and Kelly Anderson.

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