

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

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Northampton, MA

ACHEBE BETTY POWELL

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

JULY 6 and 7, 2004
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

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Narrator

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

An epilogue regarding Powell’s name change—from Betty Jean Powell, when the interview took place, to Achebe Betty Powell—follows the transcript.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women’s history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. history at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this oral history Powell describes her extended family network and roots in the African-Methodist-Episcopal church. She details living in Germany with her father in the 1950s, her conversion to Catholicism, and attending college in St. Paul, MN. Powell recounts her introduction to activism, through the National Council of Christians and Jews, and the climate of racism and anti-Semitism in the mid-century South. Powell describes her coming out—both politically and sexually—during the 1970s, into both the gay and lesbian and feminist movements. She recounts her affiliations with the Gay Academic Union, the National Gay Task Force, the National Black Feminist Organization, Salsa Soul Sisters, Kitchen Table Press, and the Astraea Foundation, shedding new light on the politics of race, class, sex, and sexuality. Powell also describes the origins of her international feminist work and Betty Powell Associates, Powell’s consulting and training agency which does organizational development work with a focus on anti-oppression diversity.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Five 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler and Kelly Anderson. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Achebe Betty Powell.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Powell, Achebe Betty. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, July 6 and 7, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Achebe Betty Powell, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, July 6, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Powell, Achebe Betty. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, July 6 and 7, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Achebe Betty Powell, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, July 6, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted JULY 6 and 7, 2004 with:

ACHEBE BETTY POWELL

at: Brooklyn, New York

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Betty Jean Powell at her new home in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, on July 6, and this is the first day of interviewing for the Voices of Feminism Project, so that's what we're doing, for the record. And we're going to start, really, by going through your family history today. Like I said on the phone, we'll do a full life history with you and so I really want to get a sense of the entire chronology, not only of your life but a little bit about your background. So why don't you first start by talking about your grandparents on either side.

POWELL: My grandparents on either side. My grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side were, um, very present part of my life for, initially a short period of time that I can recall, maybe from about two years old until I was about five, when my grandfather died. But for those three years — my grandfather, who's name was Johnny Harris, had had a stroke, stroke or heart attack, I'm not sure. I know he died of a stroke, and came to live with my mother, one of his middle children.

And I just remember — not just — my grandfather was just a major part of my life, at least this is the narrative that I tell of myself and I have no reason to disbelieve it. The absolute facts of it all might not be — you know, if you went back and had in fact some way of looking at the history — but the experiential, what I took in from his presence, was someone who was very exacting and very, sort of, taken with me, so that the two combination was so I got that kind of exacting thing of he wanted me to, like, you know, stand tall and speak, in particular, the speaking.

He had been a minister himself. In those days, it was called — he was an AME preacher, African-Methodist-Episcopal preacher, and he was very much a rhetorician. And he was, I think, feeling a loss of not being able to be in the — he was in a wheelchair the whole time that I knew him. And a little bit loss of speech, I think. But for the most part, I just remember him talking to me really clearly. So, he taught me, anyhow, my first Bible verses and little poems, you know, by Whittier,

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or whatever. And I'm, like, three, you know. I can remember, like, three and four years old. And he had his cane, so he must have gotten up at times and walked, but I don't remember him walking. But I just remember him sort of saying, "Stand up. Stand up, daughter. Stand up." And he'd be in his wheelchair, so I'm just a little at his knee, and he used to take that cane and lift up my chin. "Put your head up. Put your head up. Put your chest back." And he'd — I could feel the poke, just so gently, of his cane and that little rubber tip poking me to stand up straight. And project, he'd say, "Project."

So, my grandfather, who came from that line, in terms of tracing my history, his father was — came out of slavery in North Florida and had actually been a preacher in the slave tradition, that is, so that he was taught — and that was not the big thing the family emphasized when it told the story, it was that, and because he was, they had made him a preacher, given him the slave Bible, you know, with its selected passages and whatever. He was taught to read and write.

And the story that we get in our family is that when great-great-grandpa came out of slavery and made a beeline for the Freedmen's Bureau to "learn figurin'," is how everybody said it, which was, they didn't teach him math. And so he wanted to know math because he wanted to own his own store, general store. So that's what he went for, and the story is he actually had a general store in what would have been Live Oak Houston, Florida, up there on the border between Georgia, there, during the time of Reconstruction.

And it was fairly successful, so he moved it to the crossroads, in a time where the stage wagon came through and they came through from the mill and so forth, the intersection there in town, and became, the term used was Postmaster General of North Florida, which meant he got to sort the mail and by what was then not zip codes but whatever, by farm plots, and deliver it to folks.

But that actually was — I always take that as an important piece of signaling a desire and the possibility of coming into full citizenship, of being a part of community, of really — the kind of thing that even to this day in some — in ways that are not a given, not that it doesn't happen. I mean, I just got off the phone with the post office and, you know, black people work in the post office and there are postal, you know, managers and all kinds of stuff. But in terms of taking leadership in community, it was just so clear that that's where he was headed in being a merchant and all that.

And I say that that's where he was headed because came, I guess it was the Compromise of 1890 or just before that, even, where it was clear that the Southerners were saying to them, to the North, get out, and the North was beginning to pull out. Jim Crow laws were already being put in place and lynchings were beginning to take place. The story of my family is that my great-grandfather's store was burned down to the ground. He was told to go back, that he wouldn't be lynched because, in a sense, the system needed him and they didn't say it in these words, but

he was to go back to preaching and sort of keep his folks in line. And it seems that that's what he did. And he had five sons, my grandfather was one of them, and five daughters. His sons were all preachers. The daughters — I think three of them were teachers. So that's —

My grandmother that I knew — I didn't know my biological grandmother, my mother's mother, she died in childbirth with the last child, and there were seven children who came out — but my step-grandmother, who I never thought of as my step-grandmother, she was Mama, but the stories of hers are just so dear. Um, do you want all of this?

ANDERSON: Sure. I want whatever you want to tell me about her that's important to you about your life.

POWELL: It's about the family and it's about — you know, because it's about her. It's a portrait of the family to tell about how my grandmother came into our lives.

So, my biological grandmother dies and my grandfather is a preacher but he's more, kind of an itinerant preacher at that time. He goes from one community to the other on different Sundays and preaches but he really, his real work was pine sap. He bled the trees of the pine sap and the resin and all that sort of things, and all the products that came from that. So that was his work and he had these — but he had these children, seven children, including a baby. And um, he tried to keep them and he tried to have a woman come to take care of the kids and I guess there were two or three different ones and they didn't work out, and the last one was, you know, obviously this was a very poor woman and needy herself, and she would take food and the kids would say, my aunts and uncles would, and my mother, "Papa, you can't have this lady, she's not nice to us and she takes our food." Blah-blah-blah. OK.

So, but it's just interesting to have all these little details of the story, which I got more details of it from my mother after *Roots*, when I went home and put the tape under her. I said, "OK. Talk." And I would tell the little, the lead lines of these stories that we would hear and I would get more, I got more details, so, this is how I have some of this detail.

And so, she said, so then, he took them and he took them up to Live Oak. They were in one of the smaller towns around there, and split them up between the different relatives, the aunts. And the kids were, you know, extremely sad and he was, totally, just grief stricken, the thought that he had to do it, because he had promised his wife, my grandmother, that he would not separate the children. She — Sally was her name, Sally Harris — and she had made him promise on her deathbed that he would not separate the children. And so, but he did.

So now — and this is really a story but I can only believe it, at least, how people have experienced it, no matter what you call it — the story is that my grandfather, one night, after he had taken the children and put

them around with the various relatives, that as he was sleeping, he felt one side of the bed go down and he woke up, or, in his dream, he turned, and it was my grandmother Sally, and she said, "Johnny, you separated my kids. You can't do that." She said, "You'll have to get a wife and bring my kids back together."

So my grandfather, sure enough, started really actively looking for a wife and — you put it out in the church and the whole thing. And obviously, I don't have all the details of that but somewhere it got back to, you know, that little — I forget my now my step-grandmother's last name, it'll come to me, or not — but anyhow, my grandfather started courting her and the kids kind of learned about it because he'd go and visit them and they said, "Oh, papa, papa, marry her!" Or whatever.

And as it turns out, he brings the kids back home and he is getting ready to marry her. My oldest uncle, AC, he, you know, has them dress up one night. I'm assuming this is a Saturday night or something and come with him to town and tells all the others to go to sleep. And so, his oldest son is his best man. And they come back home but the kids are all sleeping, so it's the next morning that they wake up and they — and they come downstairs and the older son, Uncle AC, said to them, you know, "Come down." And they had to, like, stand up straight and everything.

And he says, and this line just always knocks me out, he says, "We have a new mama now. Come down and say good morning and mind your manners." And my mother says, each one of them came down and did a little curtsy: "Morning, mama. Morning, mama." And that's how my step-grandmother came into our lives.

ANDERSON: Did she bring her own children into that marriage?

POWELL: No, none whatsoever. As a matter of fact, she and my grandfather had one child together, which she was my Aunt Naomi (Na), my mother's younger sister and my mother practically raised her. They were like this. When my mother migrated to Miami in her late twenties, my Aunt Naomi, who was her baby sister, followed us a few years after. And so Mama was my Mama until she died at the age of 90 in California about 10, 15 years ago.

ANDERSON: How did she end up in California?

POWELL: And the way she ended in California, my — so my grandfather's — so there they are with us, but I'm now 3, 2, 3, 4, 5 years old, my grandfather dies, and so I remember vividly his funeral, and um, within a year or so, my grandmother's sister, Aunt Mary — Aunt Mary and Uncle Strickland, had ended up in California and I never have gotten this story straight. I keep trying to get it from my mother. I think it's that my Aunt Mary's father went to Africa looking for diamonds in the 30s. It was like a big deal. They were fairly successful but not so much so in

coming back in through California and they stopped in California. It was the Depression time. California was supposed to be a better, you know, place. So that's how part of the family ends out in California.

My Aunt Mary then says to Mama, "Come out." In terms of her grief, and so forth, and loss, and just try to. And she came, she wanted Mama to stay, and Mama said, "Oh, no, no. My life is back home. I have to go back." But Aunt Mary kept on and asked her to come again and told her — there was another couple of years, a year or so, and said, you know, that she had a husband for her. In those kinds of days, it was kind of an arranged marriage. Like, I have a husband for you. You need somebody to take care of you. So my grandmother went down and she actually did marry again. This guy was part black and mostly Native American.

It was not a happy marriage, but — and Mama worked much harder than she'd ever worked in her life. Not that hard work was a bad thing, I mean, they had a farm and everything, even when my father — my grandfather was a minister. He became a very successful minister and whatever, whatever. So, but then, my grandmother lived in California all her life.

And others, like my Aunt Naomi moved to California at a certain point. I had a cousin Lois who went out to visit Aunt Naomi and then she stayed. She was a teacher. She lived in Riverside, California, until she died. She died young, I mean, young in that I think Lois was a little older than I — maybe 67, 68, like that, when she died. It was about ten years ago. So we've had a California connection ever since then. I remember, I was eight, so it was only three years later that I'm going to California. At eight, that was my first trip to California. And Mama —

ANDERSON: Sorry. And many of the siblings did stay in Florida, though? There was a sizable —

POWELL: Yes, a sizable number who stayed in Florida of my mother's — yes, oh, yeah.

ANDERSON: So that still feels like —

POWELL: Lots of family —

ANDERSON: where your roots are on that side.

POWELL: My roots are, on that side, are definitely in Florida. Florida, and then Georgia. My father was from Georgia, Macon. And my father's father I never knew. He and my grandfather on that side were separated from my grandmother when I was born, so I never knew him. But my grandmother on my father's side, oooh. She was the matriarch. She was the matriarch of both families. It was like, Old Lady Kelly, they called her. [laugh] Ella Kelly. [laugh]

And it was not always very pleasant for my mother because, in fact, I was actually a love child. My mother and father were not married, and part of that was my grandmother's doing, is that she did not want my father to marry my mother. My mother was older than my father, by ten years, and my grandmother was very much a — I came to live in Germany later in my life because my father was in the military, and I learned the word "*streber*" which means striver, and it's beyond, it's like, with intensity, and real — my grandmother was a *streber*, you know, it was just about climbing the ladder.

So she had plans for her son and it was not about marrying an older woman who was, at that time, a maid, a housekeeper. So she came from a good a family and all that stuff, and preachers, but still, it was not the right match.

ANDERSON: Was your dad's family more middle-class?

POWELL: They were working-class. They were working-class blacks. But working-class, solid, that looked like middle class in the 1940s, for black folks. And with, of course, aspirations for going higher and higher, which they did. And so, my father was in the Army from almost the time I'm born. In 1941, he goes in. I'm born in 1940. I think they marry and it's — but my father's gone immediately and so for all intents and purposes, they were never really together and my grandmother actually arranged where she got the allotment checks that would go to — she got everything, you know. And she would dole it out to mother.

She was very fair, but she had to control it all. And in all fairness to her — how shall I say it? This is for the historical record. Do I say she was a good woman? Yes, of course, she was a good woman. We all have goodness. And, but she — her intentions were all good. She wanted the best for everybody around her. It's just that she got to determine how that, what that looked like.

And so the best for me, was — I had this loving family on my mother's side and the best for me was, from her point of view, was that — and I would definitely have the experience of this loving family, the Kelly's, and so I had to be brought to her every Friday afternoon, and I stayed through Sunday, and it was with — everybody went to the same church, our families went to the same church, and that was a major part of our lives. It was an organizing principle. St. Paul A.M.E. church. So my mother saw me again on Sunday morning in church.

My cousins on that side, who, you know, helped raise me and my older cousin Ella, is, like, ten years older than I, so, Ella, Julius — Julius unfortunately died. I mean, he didn't help raise — Julius was older than I, so there was — he was 14 years old when — again, I've never been able to understand what it was that killed Julius, but it was very sudden. My image of Julius is holding his hands out to take me from my brother when my brother would bring me every Friday, there with my little

suitcase and whatever, whatever. So that, kind of being taken into Julius's arms and he's only 9 or 10 years old, whatever. This image.

And the second image that I have of him — what? I just haven't talked about my family in so long — I'm sorry but I'm going to tears on this. Just very precious memories. And the other — the last memory I have of Julius is when my brother would come. This is my younger brother, David, younger — he's older than I am, by three years. David would spend some time playing with Julius, and I'm remembering my last memory of him, maybe I'm 7 or 8 or something, is Julius and David throwing a football back and forth, and Julius literally, I mean, you could almost take a photo, a classic photo of a kid going up in the air to catch the ball. And then he was dead. It was some heart something or something. Some childhood thing. OK, so.

But this part of the family, the Kelly's, was very much an instrumental part of my life. My aunt in that family — in that household lived the grandmother and my father's sister, my Aunt Jo and her two children, those are my cousins, Julius and Ella, and my Aunt Jo had, of course, the training of her mother, was this *streber* thing in her — my Aunt Jo, you just, she was a — everybody was a maid. She was a maid. And then, she learned upholstery and then she knew that she wanted to be a nurse, and she always said to me that I was going to be a doctor. She just told me, "You're going to be a doctor." Medicine was her big thing. But this is how I got all this *streber* thing in that household. It was, like, you will go far.

And my Aunt Na, actually, my Aunt Jo, pardon me, actually ended up, as I'm sitting here in Crown Heights, moving over into Crown Heights, that was my — she ended up, when I'm in graduate school, come to New York graduate school, so I'm 20 years old, she ends up coming to New York because the Manpower Career and Development Association offered nursing programs for people who didn't have a full formal college education, and they gave you part college and so forth. And she became — she lived, she brought her children up here. My youngest cousins, it was her second set of kids, Joyce and Beverly, when they're like, 11 and 12, or 9 — not even that, 10, 11, and they stay for two years and she does this incredible nursing program, becomes a practical nurse, goes back to Florida, then gets her RN and become a cancer specialist nurse, and then unfortunately, she probably practiced for ten years and she died of cancer herself, much too young.

But that's my father's side of the family. That's enough. So, I think I've told a lot about family.

ANDERSON: Was your dad the only boy?

POWELL: He was not. He had two other brothers, Uncle Leroy and Uncle Michael. Uncle Michael and my dad were both — went into the military. My grandmothers steered them in that direction, almost like today. Despite the segregation of the Army and so forth, I would say much more hope

and chance of really getting a solid education, like my father graduated high school and then into the Army. He finished college. He moved up to the rank of captain. My Uncle Michael lived in, but he went in the Navy, did the same thing, came up officer, ended up living in San Diego, that was another piece, and then came back to Florida and in his retirement, has actually had to move back to California now. But he and Aunt Vena lived in Florida, he's almost upper middle class in terms of the achievement. So, *strebers* on that side for sure.

ANDERSON: So, tell me how your parents met.

POWELL: Actually, I think it was some kind of church affair, but I don't have it clear in my head what kind of affair.

ANDERSON: She's in northern Florida, he's in —

POWELL: No, I'm sorry. Now, they've all — Miami was a great central place for people migrating from different parts of Florida and Georgia and other southern places.

ANDERSON: OK, so they find each other in Miami.

POWELL: They find each other in Miami.

ANDERSON: And your father's not yet in the service?

POWELL: And my father is not yet in the service but clearly headed there. And you know, within a nanosecond, there he is. And my memory of my father is basically, of being, that's my memory of my father, my father is in the Army. And it's a good memory in that my mother very much cultivated a connecting, you know, with him, in that sense.

So, you know, during the war, I just have a sense, I mean, I'm 2, 3, 4, and 5 years old, but by the time, maybe I was 5 or 6, I was in kindergarten when I wrote my first letter to him. I can remember, because I'm barely writing, I mean, printing, and I'm remembering my mother letting me, or actually, making me write out the whole address, so this APO became a very significant thing to me, like, my father had such a different kind of address! It was the American Post Office [laughs], and all the whole numbers that went with that. So, but the thing is, the pattern of communicating with my father every week, writing a letter to my father every week, Sunday night, writing letters, that my mother did, and I would sit and write a letter.

And receiving things from — at this time, it's post-war so we're going to '46 and my father was in Japan, he was in Libya — I'm getting, you know, gifts from these places, these far away places. Korea.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and you see him very seldomly.

POWELL: I see him every two years until I then go to live with him, which was a major, major family decision. In that, my father asked me, asked my mother if I could come and live with him so that — the big thing was that she could travel and that would be an education and, et cetera, et cetera. And it was a hard decision. I can remember getting totally excited about the idea, but knowing that I had to play it really cool and not just wait, just wait, and so it would be listening. The conversations that went on in my memory were many. And my Uncle AC coming and sitting on the porch and talking with my mother and my Aunt Jo, coming, sitting on the porch, talking to my mother. My Aunt Na, and me, like, listening behind the screen door and all of the various and sundry opinions. But the theme that seemed to keep coming up, “Well, Rachel, the child will get an education and, you know, she’ll probably go overseas.” That was the term in those days.

And finally, the decision was made that I could go. And it was, you know, pivotal for shaping my life. We lived in California for a minute and then Texas and then we were in Germany for several years. And that was, like, that travel, that expansion of self. I mean, I had that sense when we went to California, when we would travel across country, and I got that very clear at 8 that the world was much bigger than Miami and much more possibility than the kind of — I didn’t know the term racist, it was just segregated and tight and whatever, my life, I didn’t know that. On some level, I didn’t know it because I lived in a colored section of town and to me, it was that same thing, what is it, Richard Wright, I heard on the radio, “I lived in the ghetto and all the while I thought it was home.” So, it was just home and it was a very rich home and very nurturing and very, you know, everything, from school to church to all the little organizations and teas and speaking things. But I knew that there was something really, really special that would happen if I got to travel with my dad, and sure enough, it did, and I just had this expansive life.

ANDERSON: So it wasn’t so much a nugget of dissatisfaction or unhappiness at home in Miami as much as it was a yearning for something more?

POWELL: No, oh yeah, just to — to something more.

ANDERSON: Even though you really didn’t know what that was.

POWELL I didn’t.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

POWELL: It’s like, you know, when you came in today and I showed you that card and referenced, somebody sent me a birthday card with Amy Uzola’s quote, “If you ask me why I came here, I came to live out loud.” And

from the time I'm like this, you know [gesture to indicate smallness], I just came to live out loud. It was just really clear. There's a story in my family that goes, you know, Betty Jean would put her little hands on her hip, like at 2 years old, or 3, whenever I first learned to talk, and if somebody says something and, in my mind, I didn't know what it was, I'd go, "Well, I never heard of that." [laughs] It was like, and if I didn't hear it, you better tell me quick [laughs]. It was like, the world was in my head and my heart was already big. And then, thank God, I had enough sense to see that it was beyond just that. And, I don't know. So, I was making that connection.

So, it was — I can't tell you what a loving and nurturing and whatever, again, just the teachers I had from kindergarten on. I can remember, you know, there's just stories that go on and on, in first and second and third and fourth grade, and all my friends and all my little gang and us being the little smart kids and, you know, you got to do this and that, and be in a poetry contest and I learned to play the clarinet and you know, just the music and the piano.

I was supposed to learn to play the piano. My Aunt Naomi was a wonderful pianist, this was my mother's younger sister, the one that my grandmother and grandfather did have together. And so, I used to take piano lessons from her and I wouldn't practice, and I'd come and she would, like, spank my little knuckles with this long No. 2 pencil, yellow pencil. "No, no, no. Put your hands there." And finally, she said, "If you ever come again and you haven't practiced, that's going to be the end." And of course, I didn't believe her. This is my aunt, and I come and I'm fumbling over the keys and so forth, and she says, if she were living today, she would say, "Move away from the piano." [laughs] So she said something to that effect, in 1947 language, "Take your hands off the piano." I still didn't get it, and then finally, she takes my hand, she moves them from the piano and she slams the piano down and she says, "Go home. You'll never come back again."

My mother says to me, "You'll rue the day. You'll regret the day that you never practiced." And so, sure enough, I get to college, whatever, you know, ten years later, and it wasn't the first year, but in my sophomore year, I write home and say, "Mother dear, I could take piano lessons for only \$500 a semester." In 1959, that was a pretty hefty addition to whatever [the tuition was.] My dad paid for it so I didn't — I got a little more rudiments of that. Music is just one of the loves of my life. But it started there in Florida. So, no, there was no nugget of dissatisfaction at all. It was a very rich life. And I just — I wanted more, and I got to have more and I couldn't have been more blessed.

ANDERSON: Were your parents separating at this point?

POWELL: They're separated at this point.

ANDERSON: OK.

POWELL: And of course, I remember, even when I was 8, trying to do the bringing my parents back together. My father actually happened to be stationed in California when we went to visit my grandmother in California, and he came to see us in Oakland, and I remember my mother and father and I spending a couple of days in a hotel and me, at 8, not knowing anything, not knowing what sex was. But I knew that if I could stay out of the way and just let my parents be together? So I can remember being down in the lobby of this hotel in Bakersfield, California, for hours and feeling just great, like maybe they'll get back together. You know, that stuff.

And even when my father brought me home when I was 17, after, what, five more years, almost seven years, six-seven years, I lose track of the time. It was, yeah, almost six years. I was having my last, part of the last year in high school, and my father stayed for a couple of months at that time. And he would come for coffee every morning, because they literally raised me together. My father wrote my mother a lot. He asked her advice about things. Of course, he's raising a girl child. But it wasn't just that. And so, they were both very proud of me and he would come for breakfast and I just knew this was, like, I mean, here I'm 17 but I'm still, like, oh, maybe my parents will get back together.

ANDERSON: What about in terms of the emotional connection: I mean, your father, it sounds like, might have been somewhat of a stranger by the time you go live with him, because he's been overseas so much and you've lived solely with your mother. So did you –

POWELL: Not really. I mean, it was the writing of those letters every week. He wrote me back. He sent things. He came more than every two years because when he was in the States, he actually came home, it wasn't like weekends, but it seemed like he would come and stay for a weekend and then, of course, there was the 30-day leaves every two years or 18 months or something like that. And –

ANDERSON: So you felt close to him?

POWELL: I felt very close to him in that his presence was there, and I talked about my father a lot. And then, when he was coming, it was a big thing. Not just for me, but the whole neighborhood, I rattled it around the neighborhood. And it was interesting, at my father's funeral, in '94, he died, one of the young women, not just so young, so I'm, what, 54, she's probably 44, I think she was maybe about ten years younger than I am, Trish, we used to call her. It was Patricia, Patricia White. And I didn't recognize her, and I couldn't imagine her being at my father's funeral. I mean, she was just a kid in the neighborhood and I didn't know, how, what the connection, but, you know, life goes on to life, and she was actually attending the church that my father, after he retired

from the military, became a minister. And he was like an assistant minister. Oh, no, he was a full minister. But he didn't have his church. He preached. He was a pastor with another church.

And she came over to me at the wake, no, the reception after the funeral, and said, "Betty Jean, you don't remember me." And I'm looking at her and finally, I go, "Trish?" "You knew my father?" She says, "I didn't really know your father before, you know, I joined the church where he was the minister." She said, "But everybody knew your father. Every time he came home, it was, 'The soldier man's coming! The soldier man's coming!' The whole neighborhood!" And so, it's things like that that confirm your own stories, again, the narratives, it's like, wasn't it like the whole neighborhood got involved? And sure enough, she was saying, "Yeah, the soldier man's coming."

So that sense to go back to your question of feeling my father was a stranger, not. Even though there wasn't quantitatively a lot of time. The sense of — and you have to know this grandmother, Grandmother Kelly, and then even when she died, my aunts and so forth, it's still such a connective part of that family, is all. So by the time my father asked for me, and my mother — my Aunt Jo, who's now representing the Kelly family, not crazy — not crazy. We say, my grandmother, "That crazy Old Lady Kelly." You know, she wasn't crazy, but she was just, like, intense, you know.

So my aunt was just this one loving, loving person. Aunt Jo, my father's sister, and my mother used to be kind of, like, family acquaintances, but after my grandmother dies, my Aunt Jo and my mother become like sisters. I mean, totally sisters. They do everything together. They go on vacations together. And that was growing, because my grandmother must've died when I was about 9 or 10. So it's like a year later that my father is asking me to come and my Aunt Jo is one of the ones who really is in dialogue with my mother about whether or not to do this, and not so much pushing, just the strava thing.

So when I go to live with my father, it's like, Oh, I've known you all my life but now I really get to know you. And that was the way he felt about me, and so it was pretty idyllic, too, in its own way, though there was some real, I can't say that I really kicked up my first and lasting, kind of, dance around guilt and so forth of being — I mean, I was not only guilty of being away from my mother and feeling like I had abandoned my mother, but that I had abandoned my whole neighborhood. I used to put it all out of my mind during the day and at night, I guess, began my insomnia, when I was about 14 or 15. I would lie awake thinking about the whole neighborhood and I would just go through the names, you know, Alphonse and Rosemary and Lavina and all of them and I wished they were all here. I knew I was living a charmed life and I wished that they had the opportunities, and that would go to guilt kind of thing. And, you know, I learned, and years later, it — a little about survivor guilt because it also came into — comes into play around when we get to the 60s and you know, the black

civil rights struggle and the whole notion of, well, You didn't grow up in the ghetto and you didn't grow up, you know, in the projects. Or, You're not really, really black, and that was a big thing.

ANDERSON: I'm interested in what kind of impact do you think being raised by mostly a father during your adolescence and teenage years [had] versus being with a mother. I mean, can you speak a little bit about the difference between being a girl in your mom's home versus being a girl and a young woman in your dad's home?

POWELL: Well, I would say that I wouldn't really frame it as being raised mostly by my father even though it was in my formative years, because the foundation was so strong when I went to him. I'm 12 years old, and I have gotten everything from Miss Rachel. I mean, I am, you know, Rachel Harris' daughter. And all the other people that were a part of that extended family that was so rich with aunts and uncles and cousins and the church and the people who know you and love you.

So I was coming to my father on a very strong foundation already of socialized into a way of being. And then, it's almost like my father did the icing on the cake, and while it's very formative years, I didn't go through a whole lot of adolescent *Sturm und Drang* and whatever, whatever. I was a very mature kid. And I think, though I wasn't raised military family from, you know, in terms of all those early coming up years, there was something about the modeling around me of the kids that I grew up with, which was certainly in that day, the 50s, military kids were very mature and we went through all the teenage stuff, but I didn't have any great — you know, I was already menstruating. I started menstruating early, so that thing had already been, that phenomena had already taken place.

There was a difference in that I was freer. I owned myself. Now, my father had rules and regulations and stuff, but he totally trusted me that I was going to do the right thing and be where I had to be. Of course, you're in a protected context of as a lot of our life was — in some ways, fortunate and unfortunate — the American ghetto, let's say, especially when we lived in Germany. But even that ghetto was pretty wide and broad, especially — we lived in Mannheim for two years and then we lived in Heidelberg.

And in Mannheim — it was about 18, 20 miles or something from Heidelberg — when I was first in the ninth grade, I had to take the school bus into — and then we would stay in Heidelberg and do things. I'm 14 years old. But we would go to the American teenage club and the American snack bar and you know, you did your stuff and then, you know, you came home. You had your club things. You had this and that.

Then we moved to Heidelberg and we lived in what would be a kind of suburb — if Heidelberg were Manhattan we probably lived like about this far, into Freudenheim. And you'd take a — the bus was a huge part of military transport, you know, back and forth. It wasn't like, folks

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picking you up in cars and stuff, and you had to know the schedules because they stopped running at a certain time. There were times when we missed the last bus.

And one time in particular was really, really bad and, you know, I'm like 15 or 16, and walking in — because we totally missed the bus, we tried to take the Autobahn, which is the tram, the trolley, and stuff. We didn't know where we were going. We ended literally in Mannheim from Heidelberg but it was in an area, we didn't know it. Someone comes up to us and he says, "What are you girls" — there are, like, five or six of us, American teenagers. The bobby socks, the crinolines, the whole thing, you know, but that was a safe time. It's 1954, 55. He says, "What are you girls doing here?" and it was, like, 1 o'clock in the morning. He says, "Do you know where you are?" and we go, "No." He goes, "You're on black market square." The black market was a big thing, you know, with selling goods and stuff. And he says, "Where do you live?"

So we told him where we lived and he showed us how to get home. I can't even remember. But whatever we took, we ended up having to get off of it and walk, because I remember we were walking a whole long way along this side road and we didn't know it. And finally we see the big sign, you know, actually you get a load of where I lived. This is to tell you about the American ghetto. You're riding along the German Autobahn and you see a big sign that says Patrick Henry Village. So, we see the sign, we're so happy, and I lived on Lexington and Bunker Hill.

So, anyhow, I'm sneaking in because, oh, god, I know that I'm going to be killed. And so I come into the living room and I see my father sleeping on the couch, so I duck down low, you know, you're doing something and you're going past the couch. My father said, "Jeannie." My name was Betty Jean and he called me Jeannie or Jean. "Yes, dad." And so I was grounded, I don't know for how long, a couple of weeks.

But that kind of trust, and yet responsibility, etc., if you say, in terms of living in my dad's home, it was, like, I think, a marker, if you get a sense of me, who I was, and then the relationship to my father. It was a very special thing, relating to a father, but I didn't know how to capture, different in his household. It was almost an extension of my mother and the two of them together, though this was a male.

So, to give you an example of the two of them communicating and it's like they're present. I decided at the age of 14, we still lived in Mannheim, that I wanted to convert to Catholicism. It wasn't a quick decision. I had already been thinking about this back in Florida when I was home when I was 12. Some distant family had come through, stayed with us. I picked up the catechism. I was at a time where I was really questioning, you know, What is all of this about? I mean, it's very Jungian in that Jung does a whole number on conversions and so forth, of the adolescent, who's really trying to figure out the meaning of life. And I was very seriously into trying to figure that out and I opened their

catechism and it was the Baltimore Catechism. You know, Who made you? God. Why? To know, love, and serve Him. How many angels are there? It was, like, oooh, these folks have the answers. There seemed to be such an order to it.

And so by the time I'm with my dad, this is another instance of how I felt freer, that I could actually then say to him, I want to convert to Catholicism and I need to take lessons, whatever, instructions and stuff. And of course, you know where I'm coming from. Now, my great-grandfather out of slavery, AME church, you know, all the ministers in my family, my grandfather –

ANDERSON: And your dad's going to become one, too.

POWELL: and he doesn't know that at the time, but, you know, I'm just saturated with African-Methodist-Episcopal, you know, positive — have never heard anything negative about Catholics but it's totally out of the realm of our experience. That's also what I was seeking. Always, like, out of the realm of my experience and pushing. But I also very sincerely felt like, there're answers here. This satisfies my need to know how the world works and what God is and all that sort of thing. So, my dad says, "Well, we'll have to ask. We have to talk to your mother about this."

So, he writes my mother and says, "What shall we do? She wants to convert." I thought for sure, that's like a no. I'm going to have to wait till I'm 20 or something. And my mother writes back and I'll never forget. I've said this so many times to different people in telling this story, but it's absolutely how it went. She wrote in the letter, "Well, Jesse, if that's where Betty Jean thinks she can worship God best, then we'll have to let her go." And they did. And so my father picked me up after instructions, because by then, I think by the time I was taking these instructions, we had moved to Heidelberg.

Heidelberg was, and still is, the United States Army in Europe Headquarters, so there's this huge chapel there. The chaplain, I'll never forget, Daniel P. Che. Father Daniel P. Che gave me my instructions. My father met him, was very [impressed,] you know, whatever, and my first communion, my dad was there.

ANDERSON: Did it live up to your expectations at that time? Not as an adult, but at that time?

POWELL: At that time, oh, totally, totally, totally, totally. At that time, right through, I had declared that I absolutely had to go to a Catholic college once I was, you know, back home in Florida and everybody's going to, like, Howard University and Hampton Institute, and even some of the other white colleges, by this time it's '58, and I have to go to a Catholic women's college and they're all looking at me like, You're really strange. And I do, I end up at the College of St. Catherine and again, it's like, This is totally right for me. And what was so right and so perfect

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was the particular college, the particular group of educators, I call them, who happened to be nuns, that I met, because it really helped me on the path that I feel was the path for me, which was going to be away from the Catholic Church. And I say helped me in that, these — I always say, and I will put this on record, that the nuns, they were the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet, a French order that came over here after Louisiana Purchase, starting down in Louisiana. And came up the Mississippi following the loggers, the expansion of the country. And so they built schools and hospitals all the way up to the top of the Mississippi River. Yeah, the mouth starts up in northern Minnesota, and so they had a hospital and a college there and high schools.

And actually, my college was the College of St. Catherine. Font Bonne Hall was a very elite girls' school. Elite, you know, I don't use those words so easily, but it was just really, in terms of quality of the education. I find out many years later, by the way that I came to be connected with her, that Kate Millet went to Font Bonne Hall. And so she was one of those little teenage girls on our campus who came to high school.

But that college, these nuns then, to come back to them, the ones who are now the professors and administrators of St. Catherine were, I always said, they weren't really nuns to me. They were libertines in drag. [laughs] And they were. They were so committed to excellence and quality of mind. And art and music. And this is how I got through — like, Ma, I have to take piano lessons because Sister Lucina and Sister Mary Davida, they were just fascinating. Mary Davida was the head of the music department, Sister Lucina, and they played piano beautifully. They used to give concerts, you know, for us at different times. Sister Lucina played violin. She also was a piano teacher. I took my piano lessons from them.

My father, when he came to the college, maybe when I was a junior, part of the thing was showing parents around and he was a very special visitor because he came from such a long way and also I was, like, their Negro on campus. That's a whole other thing. There were others who began coming, a lot more. But there were at least one or two every year. And so, it also made my father very special to visit. And so, it was showing him everything from the swim club to me doing a little concert for him in Sister Mary Davida's studio, which is, I never got to go in there because she was chair of the department. Only music majors got to go in there. But I got to give him my little "Für Elise," [concert] you know.

So anyhow, I'm just trying to show you the quality of who these women were, which wasn't about Catholicism in terms of some kind of fundamentalist Catholicism. They chose who would be the actual chaplain and they made a career decision that they didn't do Jesuits. Jesuits were intellectual but they were too hellfire and brimstone, so they would use them for retreats. But they used the Dominicans for chaplains. So Father Bullock was their choice because he could

appreciate Sister Mona, who was the head of the art department and one of my, you know, totally close idols. I did, like, four years of art, and art history and everything and she sent me off to New York. I came to graduate school with a list, art off the beaten track in New York. Sister Mona was, like, wild, and she would design the vestments for Father Bullock. So you're kneeling at mass and you're looking up at the altar and you think you're looking at a Picasso painting.

The art. The music. Father Bullock. The politics. Father Bullock who could come — I'm sure he did many memorable sermons, and I'm saying that not just as a throwaway. I know that he did, because we were always inspired. One that I recall is just totally imprinted. He turns and comes to the pulpit for the sermon, and there's this silence and there's this silence, and there's this silence. And you get the sense of there's not something wrong. Now you get that he is really waiting for something and you know not what. And out of this silence comes, "And how many of you prayed for the soul of Patrice Lumumba this morning?" And his point was, I know you prayed for Dag Hammarskjöld. And see, these two had died, we're talking the 50s now, and the time of the United Nations really coming into being. The African colonies really gaining their independence, one by one. It was just a very exciting time.

And they were in the throes of the politics of that all. They had nothing directly to do with this but it just so happened that Kofi Annan, who is now the secretary general — I had a class with him, because he went to college at Hamlen College, which was very much known for its international affairs. And the four of the mini-colleges in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area would do courses together, interdisciplinary, and I did Middle East area studies, as a cross-college interdisciplinary thing, with him. And so we would have teas and receptions where the foreign students, because I ended up majoring in German and French and then turned it to French and German, I was very much a part of the foreign students' clubs. But it was all very political and we would have receptions for speakers on political things and all that sort of thing.

And the practice of Catholicism was given but in the very ecumenical — we were moving into John XXIII and they were, like, totally with it. And when, by the time I'm in New York and graduate school, you know, they're already — the nuns were moving out and into their own apartments and, there were the nuns already who had, in terms of quality of education, they were very, very keen on making sure that their young nuns who completed college went immediately for the master's and then through the Ph.D. And so we had Phi Beta Kappa at one of two Catholic colleges at the time — it was Georgetown and the College of St. Catherine because we had such a great number of doctoral [faculty.]

The shaping took over from where my father left off, in terms of expansion, expansion. Here it was expansion of mind, expansion of spirit, expansion of political view and a sense of responsibility.

ANDERSON: It sounds like a real continuation of your grandparents' legacy as well. I mean, the tapping of the cane, but also your grandmother, and it sounds like a really good choice you made in terms of the same values, standards, commitments, excellence.

POWELL: Yes, yes, yes. And these things happen by choice, coming together with the fortuitousness or whatever, because while I had applied for, you know, more than eight or nine colleges at that time, and was about to come up to New York for an interview in Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, when I get a call from — my mother actually took the call and I came home she told me about it — I had also applied for scholarship funds from a group called Catholic Scholarships for Negroes, Incorporated, which was basically a family in Springfield, Mass., the Putnam Family.

And Mrs. Putnam took a very direct interest in those who — you know, I had scored high on the SATs [then known as the College Boards] and I was getting the full scholarship from them, and she was the one that called and said, would I consider the College of St. Catherine, because Sybil Evans — I'll never forget, I had never met her but I know her name, because I replaced Sybil Evans as the Negro. I mean, they actually would never have thought of it in that way, but obviously, that's what it was. But the Putnams had supported Sybil, who was graduating and they knew — I had already gotten the scholarship from them through my scores and stuff, but they knew then that the college itself was then opening up that full-tuition scholarship, you know, books and everything, for another, what did they call it, Deserving Negro Student. So I said, "Well, I never heard of it and I never thought of Minnesota," but again, it was like, Oh, now, college to me is travel. You go. That's going someplace because I'd never been there. And then I read about them and I thought they sound really as good as all the other places that I was looking into.

ANDERSON: And this Catholic fund supported you for the four years?

POWELL: They did. They just gave you, at that time it was like \$1000 a semester, which was a big thing, to cover your books. But then, what Ms. Putnam was so good at was that, of looking around to see what other things supplemented, because theirs was just a small family fund. They gave you the top and then, so that then the college gave me the whole tuition.

ANDERSON: Right. So that was part of your decision to go but not the entire —

POWELL: It was part of the decision to go but not entirely, because I was getting offers other places too, but the fact that I could talk about this place with Mrs. Putnam and then it ended up being, like, who knew? Who knew from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota.

ANDERSON: I hadn't heard of it before.

POWELL: Oh, please, who knew that it would be two blocks from the Mississippi River and, you know, I love rivers, or that, even after I left, they were proving themselves totally in line with me. The College of St. Catherine became the site for — which is a big feminist thing — the base for Women Historians of the Midwest and they still meet there. They graduated some of the most radical women who have entered into the legislature of Minnesota as well as, there's one in the U.S. Congress, and I don't know, but they've just continued to be — and, years later, here I am now, a lesbian, living in Brooklyn, with my lover, Ginny Apuzzo, and we do many, many parties, benefits, in this wonderful place that we were fortunate to dwell in, that was a garden duplex, and so we had lots of parties and it would flow out into the garden.

And so, here we're having a benefit for someone and one of the people that I'm talking to, haven't seen in quite a while, Louise Fishman, who is an artist, and I first knew her in the Gay Academic Union, that's how we first came out. And she says, "So, what're you doing?" The chit chat. I said, "You're still giving lectures and stuff on art?" She says, "Yes, I'm going to a small college in the Midwest and giving a thing." And I said, "Oh, where?" She said, "Oh, you wouldn't know it." I said, "Try me." I had no idea. I just said that. And she said, "Oh, it's actually," and then she's going on describing it and she said, "Well, it actually has the only feminist art department in the country." And da-da-da. And I'm going, I just knew that she was going to say — I said, "What is the name?" She said, "It's the College of St. Catherine." I said, "Louise, those are my women. Those are my libertines in drag. Of course, they would have the only feminist art department! Sister Mona!"

ANDERSON: That's great.

POWELL: So, that was just a major piece of the shaping of Betty Jean.

ANDERSON: Yeah. We're going to have to pause.

POWELL: So we'll pause. Good.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: Let's backtrack to some of those stories that you've been talking about, [VHS begins here] and talk about the experiences of being black and female in some of those contexts. We can start with the home that you grew up in in Miami and the community there — particularly interested in the military experience — and then we'll move on to St. Catherine's. So, I'd to look at it from two angles: one is your experience of being black and female in those contexts, and the other is your awareness of the growing civil rights movement and what kind of information you were getting about that, particularly in the military: how that was starting to shape your thinking, how you talked about it in your family. So, you can start where you like.

POWELL: Well, I'll start — so interesting. There's a story that I use, an anecdote that I use in the trainings that I do, the work that I do now in the facilitation in anti-oppression training and consulting and coaching and so forth, diversity is used the term often used. But there's a Racial Justice Institute that is a part of my work. It's a design that runs three days, part 1, three days, part 2, and in one of the exercises, I give examples of when you became clear as a child that folks were treated differently based on gender, based on class, and based on race color.

The one story that I use based on race goes back to — I'm maybe just past preverbal, just getting into verbal, but I don't read signs or anything, obviously, very well. Or didn't even notice. I'm out there being in the world, and I remember that there is always a time when we would go into this different world. We'd go somewhere on the bus, well, not somewhere, it was called "downtown," and you went downtown on a bus, across the railroad track, and you entered into a whole new world. Well, we knew it as Woolworth's and Burdines, and whatever, whatever, but it was a very white world. That I was conscious of? Not in any frightening way or scary way, it just — you know, it was different.

But I do recall, and I tell the story that I remember, in terms of getting clear, I remember the feel of my mother's fingernail running down the back of my neck as she yanked me away from the Whites-Only drinking fountain. So, it's got to be, what, '43, '44, like that. My mother said nothing, but I got all the fear in that scraping of a fingernail down my neck. It didn't hurt a lot, but you could feel it. And also the movement. My mother never handled me in that way, so I got all of her fear and I — well, I didn't have words.

It only took a few years before I knew where to step, where not to go, where, you know, what to do and so forth. So that, clearly, I am informed by racism and segregation and a sense of other from a very early age, though because we are so contained, if you like, in the colored section of town, which is not a ghetto, but it has the class thing

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is there. There are poorer sections and, you know, we lived in a not-so-poor section but it wasn't the middle class — it wasn't where the teachers and the doctors and lawyers lived, either.

ANDERSON: Because your mother was working as a housekeeper?

POWELL Because my mother was working as a housekeeper. My father was in the military and sending allotment checks and so forth. My mother was saving like crazy but, we were just living a working-class life, you know, by and large, so we got to get things that were probably more middle class in certain material things. But the relationships — I would not be able to tell a story of my life and say that I had some kind of, um, consistent encounter with the white world that was hostile to me, you know, that I have got the racism, like, in my bones, as I am — that foundation from one until the time I'm 12, until I'm going to live with my father.

But I'm aware that, I mean, I'm just aware that there's something very separate and very unjust that is going on and I really got it when we go to California and it's not segregated, and we get to go to a park for the first time, and there's a swimming pool and whatever, whatever. And I come back and I'm kind of on a little soapbox, literally on a box in my neighborhood and saying, "You know, we have to do something about it." And I don't even remember what it was do something about, but I just remember that.

And then my home — it was always so much about striving. I don't remember getting the messages a lot about how unjust or unfair or whatever things were. And I'm going to take a leap now, though, because I'll talk about the military later. But I'm going to come back to now, I've grown up and I'm, 11, 12, I go live with my father, I come back, I'm 17, and when I come back, and that last year in high school, at Booker T. Washington High School, which is all black, I'm in that same colored section of town, it's '56, 1956, and I am so aware of racism and because I've lived this very, you know, full and integrated life even with such difficulties which I'll talk about. It was, like, Good Lord, what is this?

And so, immediately, there's something, this fire jumps up, you know, begins to rise up in me, and I totally hook into the National Conference of Christians and Jews, which at that time in the South. One of their programs with high school kids was that in the segregated South, they would put out a call to white schools and to black schools — and that's what it was at the time, just white and black — that youngsters who wanted to become a part of the youth program of NCCJ, which would bring white and black kids together under one roof and the aegis of NCCJ, before could come and learn about justice and — they never said racial justice — would learn about justice. We'd learn about justice, and I heard that over the PA system and it's, like, Yeah, that's

for me. And with my few friends, we went. And it was a place to, where I had my first [political] learning experience where you actually talked about — at that time, it was called prejudice, it wasn't called racism, it was prejudice, and how we talked about it and how we had to fight, you know, and find ways to, you know, work against, et cetera.

The civil rights movement's not even in my head or in the air, but obviously, the bus ride of Montgomery, boycott, and everything in '54 had been taking place, but I'm not hearing any of that. I'm — what I was really working with was, like, what you could do.

My first mentor in justice around that context — well, my first mentor in justice was really my father, because the things that we had to do as we walked through the world — and I will tell you some of those incidents. My father would be teaching me lessons about justice when I was 10, 11, 12 years old. But a formal kind of mentoring came from Max Karl, a Jewish man who was the regional director of NCCJ, and, you know, he just taught us about the fact that you get to actually fight for justice, you get to have that as a part of your life and the struggle, and even when you don't know how. And I remember as kind of being in a state of, like, Well, what? What will we do?

And so we used to actually — what he, the NCCJ arranged with other groups that wanted to do this was the paring of a black kid and a white kid who would go out to speak, and it was called Youths Speak Against Prejudice, and we were part of this little program, and we would go to all kinds of conferences and whatever and you would just — you would speak out, and we had, like, this whole thing that we would do and it was just so intense.

ANDERSON: It was so radical for that time.

POWELL: For that time.

ANDERSON: You must have been monitored by the FBI.

POWELL: Oh, I want to tell you who we were monitored by. We were monitored by the Board of Ed, because we decided that we wanted to do something more than just even do the speak-outs kind of thing, and so we decided that we needed to meet outside of NCCJ. This is, you know, white kids and black kids who were — I mean, we were so — so serious. Thank God, thank God, we were so serious about this thing. We have to do more than just this speak thing.

So we started meeting at each other's homes. We'd meet at a white kid's home, then we'd meet at a black kid's home. And then — and we decided that one of the things we were going to do, we were going to volunteer together to “man,” we'd call it, the mobile blood units and so forth that were downtown, but we were going to do that together as, you know, white-and-black-kids, integration things. And we went and we

made out the application and so forth, and the people laughed at us. They said, "What are you trying to do? This is a joke." And I remember them saying, "Those Jews put you up to this?" We kept meeting and kept trying to figure out. We were all, by this time, everybody's comparing, who's applying to what colleges for what and for SAT and what — we should all try to go to an integrated college and all this stuff.

We get a message — I'll never forget, comes over the PA system, the names of all the kids in our Booker T. Washington High School, the names of all the kids who were part of NCCJ. Our names were called and it was said, "Would you report immediately to the guidance counselor's office?" And I didn't know. I thought, what — [two voices] are they going to let us? They've heard that we've been trying to do this thing and maybe they're going to help us or something.

No, the word was, to us, we've gotten word from the Board of Ed that some of you kids have been meeting together outside of NCCJ in each other's homes, and you know that white and black are not [to meet] together. It's illegal, they said to us. And I thought there was something wrong with that. It couldn't be illegal to gather in somebody's home. But for them, this was public space because we were children, they owned us in a sense. I mean, you owned where, how, children go and come. So a private home became a public space you could not meet [in].

I remember the principal — I remember us being so disappointed, but not because I was already disappointed in the principal. I thought, he's not really standing up for, you know, for our rights, because he always sort of kowtowed to the white folks that would come from the Board of Ed when they would come for special assemblies and so forth, And I used to really pity him and think, [what a compromise.]

So I was just really disappointed and then angered, but I was more angry than disappointed, and all of us were angry when he said they, you know, the Board of Ed has learned that you've been meeting and it's illegal and you will not be able to do that anymore. Well, we thought, well, they could say that but we will do — I remember that running through my head and all of us later, we were comparing notes, like, we thought, OK, so they say, but we'll do what we want.

But then, it was followed by, "And if you continue to do this, none of you will graduate from high school. You will not get a diploma from the State of Florida that you graduated." And all of us, these smart serious kids, well you have to go to college, your life. And so, it was like, whoa, got you by the — gotcha, gotcha. And I — and they were saying we were not to talk to these kids, we were not to see them at any time, except in NCCJ. The white kids were called in and they were told the same thing.

And I remember there being like a sock hop or something like that we were going to, something we could do or not do, it was after a

basketball game, and all of us who were a part of this NCCJ thing knew that that was a time, and we had to plot—

I mean, this seems like so nothing compared to people being beaten over the head and hosed and jailed and so forth. But for us, in '56, it was, like, that was the universe of trying to figure out some way to buck this system, to stand for justice. That was simply my experience that took me on to more engaged stuff.

So there we are, trying to figure out how do we get to call these kids and tell them, and all of us talked together. So I remember us going across the street — there was a filling station across the street from the gym — to the public phone. And we made the arrangements with them how we [planned it all I don't remember]— that we were going to call them from this phone and they were going to be all at one person's house, whatever, whatever.

And we talked and we talked and we figured out that we were going to meet again at — I don't remember where it was, but it was — we went far, far down into Coral Gables, which was a long way for us at that time. And it was a white kid's house, and his father — no, or did we? Yes, we did, we did — and the father of this child took us somewhere that seemed like a neutral territory. I don't even remember that well, but took us somewhere so it wasn't technically in their house or something. I don't remember. But I remember us having this last meeting — though it wasn't the last time we met. It was the last meeting outside of NCCJ.

And the irony of all of that was by this time, it was getting towards the end of the year and I had received — I had gotten notice that I was receiving a bronze medallion for brotherhood. It was called the Brotherhood Award from NCCJ and some officials from the city were going to give the awards and folks from my school were going to go and be, you know, really very proud of me and the whole thing. So we were trying to figure out, like, do I say no, that I don't want to receive a thing and that, and we're strategizing and now, that we would all — everybody would be there, and it was all over Miami Beach and Fontainebleau Hotel and the whole thing and that when I got that award, all the black kids and the white kids would come up to the podium together and nobody could stop us, they had to drag us away, the police. So it was a whole big thing. And we got up and we made some kind of a statement there, about, like, we will never stop fighting to end prejudice, and da-da-da-da-da.

So that was my — it was like an — if you're talking about — the racism was there. I didn't have, you know, I don't have lashes on my back from it. I have lashes across my soul from it. So I experienced it in a very different way than somebody living in Mississippi or even somebody, maybe, who lived right there in Miami, especially the males, especially the males when they were in the wrong section of town.

My brother, being, you know, put in jail. Not by white police but by black police. Because my mother asked them to please give him the experience so that he won't steal. My mother thought my brother was stealing at one point, but she didn't want him to be caught by white cops, or ever put in a white jail, so she asked one of the black cops, who were only recent — you know, newly beginning to even have black police in the black neighborhood — to put my brother in jail for an overnight so that he could experience it, so he'd never do anything wrong, so he wouldn't be caught by a white cop.

So I know it was there and people got it across their backs. I didn't, but enough across my soul to know I have to stand in witness against this madness, and so I began in that little way there.

The racism that my father and I experienced was again much more social, not much more social, was social in that again, it wasn't lashes across my back and we were cushioned by the middle-class context that we moved in in the military. But it was really humiliating, a lot of times. And again, so the soul beating was enough to know, for me to know that there — I knew that there were people who were getting, you know, the lashings in much more harsher forms.

But my father and I were sitting in California once — this is a time when my father gave me my first really big lesson, beyond just — for justice, it was about how I stand in the world, which totally informed my becoming a feminist and everything. We were in a restaurant in Monterey, we had gone down for a weekend, Monterey Bay, da-da-da, and Fisherman's Wharf. It was '50 — I don't know what year it is, but it's early 50s and so there's, even in California, it's like, you still keep your place, even though it's more open, and you certainly don't go off to a nice restaurant on the Fisherman's Wharf. At that time, it was really nice.

But we go into this restaurant and we sit because my father wants — you know, we want to have lobster and we want to do seafood and all this stuff. And we sit, and we sit, and we sit, and it's 10 minutes and its 20 minutes and nobody even comes, you know. And I know it was at least 20 minutes, it seemed like eternity, but certainly, after some lengthy time, I say to my dad, "Daddy, let's go. We don't belong here." And I just wanted some way for us to escape this kind of, you know, clear shame. It was, like, clearly, Yeah, we might be out of Florida and out of the South but — where we didn't even think about going to a restaurant or anything —

And my father said to me a lesson that's in my soul, it just vibrates in this moment, he said, "Jeanie, wherever you are in the world is where you belong. You sit right there." And he went and got the manager. They did come over. They served us. We stayed and we ate. The tension was, like, you could cut it with a knife. They would have wished that we had gone away, but my father — and through that dinner, I remember him saying things, you know, to the effect that we will sit through this

and you will have many other things to sit through, but this is a part of your owning yourself and owning the places and the spaces that you are in the world, and your right to be there, no matter how or what.

And so I remember those — that lesson being repeated as we moved through the world in other ways. And there was a thing that we did where, whenever we were going in someplace and we knew that we were probably were going to get some shit, pardon the expression, my dad would say, “All right, Jeanie,” you know, “heads up, eyes forward.” He got very military and, you know, we could make it kind of a joke and whatever. Like I was watching the parade, my father was parade master for a while in Germany, so every Thursday when they had the parade, it was like a big joke, you know, and they would pass by, right, it was military stuff. And so, because my father didn’t take himself that seriously in terms of the military, but he also did take himself very seriously. So he would say, you know, “Heads up, eyes forward. Are you ready?” and I’d say, “Yes.” “You ready, Jean?” and I’d say, “Yes.” And we’d go in. And it was like you’d have to, you know, get that stuff up.

So, specifically in the military, my father made a big attempt to cushion me from — it was more of the stuff that was happening to him, the promotions that he wasn’t getting. The times when he would be so angry and despairing. It would just come out in stories, and then blips, when he’d say, “Yeah, and Eisenhower couldn’t even come by to review us.” The troops when he was fighting in World War II, Eisenhower did not go to review the black troops, but it was before D-Day and he was, like, Yeah, he’ll just — and it was like it was such a big thing to my father then. He was giving his life for his country and the commander and general would not, you know. But he would go through all of this stuff: so they think that I’m going to be in Quartermaster Department all my life? I’m not standing for it, et cetera, et cetera. And I would almost feel my father come to tears when, you know, this man is feeling like, but it’s the system, it’s such a huge, a real big system.

But then I would see him conferring with other, you know, with Sergeant Murphy and Sergeant Brown who were his black fellow non-com officers at that time, and they were always strategizing about how to get around the system and to get promotions and whatever. And I remember always feeling so sad because I knew that my white counterparts’ parents wouldn’t have to do that. I would go and — and they were my good friends. Again, you’re in the military and my class, you know, in the military school, there were always, like, maybe three or four black kids. And so a lot of my friends were white. And if I went home with my girlfriend, Barbara Peersal. Her father’s, you know, Colonel Peersall, and I would think, I loved him very much, and I would think, he’s not really as bright as my dad. How come my dad’s not a colonel? Now this again, is, like, really very precious. It’s like, Geez,

Betty, you got to, like, really ruminate and have anxiety over whether or not your father was a colonel or a sergeant at the time, not exactly hardcore racism in your face. It is what I knew, what I, you know, directly experienced.

The times when I really, really got it was when we'd be sort of running about as kids and the MPs would stop us and they'd like — when they would be talking to white kids and so forth, there was no hands on your billy stick or whatever. The ways in which they sometimes would try to intimidate me, putting their hand on their billy stick and, What's your father do? And you'd have to give your father's rank and serial number and the whole thing. These were — in the military, the ways in which I as, really and I have to say, a really privileged army brat at that time, did experience some of the — you couldn't even call it the boot of the racist prejudice, but I knew from friends of mine whose fathers were very much experiencing staying at, you know, well, PFCs didn't really even have their families over there for the most part. But some kids whose fathers were not of the rank of my father, who just — it was like the class and the race thing that came, you know, together and they felt it even more.

When a friend of mine would say — I don't know — and I'd say, "Aren't you coming with us on the class trip?" Well, the class trip was to Switzerland and she'd say, "I don't think so. My father can't — I bring my lunch to school every day, I can't." I mean, that was race and class, but I was very mindful that it was my black schoolmate who was the one who couldn't come with us on the trip.

ANDERSON: Did you guys stick together, in terms of the few black kids that there were on the base?

POWELL: Actually, we didn't. In the eighth grade, yes. Well, the three girls stuck together. The boy, Troy Louis — the sexism thing there was really very interesting. In the eighth grade, I did. Ninth, tenth, eleventh grade, we — actually, the black kids that I knew didn't live in the same — we got bussed in from — this is Heidelberg, so you got bussed in from Damstadt and Bertress Garten, not Bertress Garten, well, a couple of the towns around, Karlsruhe — so they lived in different towns and we got on the school bus. So I lived in Heidelberg proper area and all. I think my friends, all of my friends were white.

ANDERSON: So you would have been the only black family in that —

POWELL I was, yeah, in the context of my age group.

ANDERSON: Right, right.

POWELL: We stuck together as black families, so I was with other black families in terms of us doing our dinners and our picnics and our things together. And particularly, for my father, who very much needed other family members to, you know –

ANDERSON: So what would you say was your coping strategy during that time? It sounds like socializing with other black families to find some camaraderie — was faith another way that you –

POWELL Faith was very much for me. I mean, I converted to Catholicism. My father and I, however, went to regular church together, too, and then I would to mass, or sometimes I would go to mass earlier. I think — I would say my, actually my biggest coping strategy was an altered state of consciousness, was going into, it's just — it's not really, you know, the classic think of, you know, so there was one other black and we all stuck together or, whatever. It's like, I lived in this white world and I was immersed in it. Say when I started playing tennis in at the age of 14 and Barbara Peersall and her parents were playing tennis. I didn't actually intend to start playing tennis. I was like this, again, little, slightly bent nerd. [interruption] So I hadn't set out to learn to play tennis and actually was an interesting little story, where this friend, Barbara, and I had decided, it's the end of the school year and so what we were going to do that summer, being the little nerds that we were, was to learn 100 new vocabulary words.

ANDERSON: That is kind of nerdy.

POWELL: [laughs] So we had, I mean, you know, among the going to the American Teenage Club and do a little of this and a little of that, but it was learning those hundred vocabulary words. So of course, we had our whatever those little books were, you know, vocabulary and synonyms. So we each had gotten one, and we're sitting in the American snack bar, you know, it's like a little café and stuff, and over in the teenager section. And we're starting to quiz each other because we both were supposed to have five words down by this, whatever, second week of the summer.

And so, we're doing our little vocabulary stuff with our banana splits, and along comes our English teacher, Miss Carol. Because we all lived together, you know, I mean, you saw your teachers and so forth. But in particular, Miss Carol, she was our ninth grade English teacher, now we were going into the tenth grade. She was very, very influential again on me in terms of just my education — who she was and the possibilities. She was a very wild woman who was teaching in the military schools, had taught in Japan, had taught in Libya, and now — all at military schools, and she loved to travel, clearly. If we had time, I would describe how she started each class, but I won't go into that.

But she comes over us, and typical Ms. Carol: “Well, girls, how are you?” “Fine.” “And what are our plans for the summer?” And we were so proud. Oh, our English teacher and we can tell her that we’re going to learn a hundred new vocabulary words. And so of course, we tell this, very proudly. And she says, “What a waste! You should be out playing tennis, doing something with your bodies, not your minds!” [laughs] So, it was so funny and interesting because, actually, my friend Barbara’s parents had just started taking tennis lessons in the spring and they were trying to get her interested in it. And so, we decided, Oh, well. [laugh] If that’s all the world wants, we could do that. So, we actually did start going, you know, and I asked my father if I could do tennis and he said, “Yes. That’d be great.”

Because then, he went to Heidelberg and, you know, the city of Heidelberg, the Neckar River runs through it, it’s just wonderful, the way the banks are really up high and the streets and everything are up above, and so, the American Swimming Club and the Tennis Club and everything was all right together up on the banks of the Neckar and you looked over and it was just beautiful. It was a wonderful place to go, and tennis lessons were not — what? five dollars. I mean that was a lot for some people, but so I took tennis a couple of times a week and began to really get into it.

And I’m talking about coping strategies. It occurred to me that, ooh, this is really getting into, I mean, tennis is, again, 1954, ’55, going into — and I hear of, because I do somehow get access to *Ebony* magazine and *Jet*, maybe occasionally it shows up in the PX, and I learned that there’s this woman called Althea Gibson, who was playing tennis who was the first black woman to win Wimbledon. It’d be ’57, she won Wimbledon. And so, I feel like I have a role model. But I know that also going into an altered state of consciousness to be expanding my life out of the boundaries of black experience and black possibility. And to me, in that time, when I say “altered state of consciousness” I sort of rationalize, But this is good for the race if I do something that is different and I also, all the time, was always going, And it’s good for me because I like it. I like being, like, all expansive.

So part of my coping mechanism was taking everything that I could from a white middle-class environment and context and very protected one in the military context, and trying to rationalize that somehow I was also helping the race. Again, it’s so hard for me to put this on record, because I’m feeling, as I’m trying to talk about this, a kind of — shallow is the word that I want but it’s not like, I’ve never been a shallow person internally, but a shallowness of — there’s something thin about me trying to describe the experiences of racism in my life in that, those moments in my life in that context, almost any time in my life because I have been especially spared a lot, while at the same time, I can tell you story after story of the insult to my human dignity.

So there was always, in those contexts of taking everything that I could get from those situations and trying to feel I was doing something for the race, a real consciousness that wherever I was, people were often working very hard to be OK about me being there. Or, if they weren't working hard, they were experiencing the tensions of the people who were working hard.

Not always, always, always, and sometimes it was less that — many times it was less that when I was in the presence of just Germans, which is also another interesting piece of my life at that time, in that I did not know about the Holocaust when I lived in Germany. My discovering it when I'm 19 in college and confronting my father with, Why didn't you ever tell me? And his saying, I never would have spoiled your childhood in that way. You were much too sensitive a child. Blah-blah-blah-blah. And I'd get angry with the Germans. I was angry that I ever liked Germans. I loved the Germans. I loved the German culture, et cetera, et cetera. It's another little slight piece and I have made peace with that. I finally was able to actually go back to Germany in '73. And have a fair number of German friends and everything because it was a part of my life, and know all their — you know, so much the struggle, of a lot of Germans with good conscience and a lot of the horror.

But at that time, part of what I'm feeling as a black human being in that context is I'm much more comfortable around all Germans, though they're not without, coming up with some real zingers, in that, coming out, my father loved opera and that's how I came to love opera and we used to go — I didn't always like going, I would rather have been with my friends, you know, and stuff — but we used to go, certain seasons, every Saturday, the Heidelberg little operetta or whatever. And then the big opera would come down from Berlin, you know, like the Metropolitan.

And we're coming out of the opera once, the first time I ever saw *La Bohème*, I guess. I can't remember. And this woman, older German, literally grabs me, you know, by the arm, and she's pulling me around and looking at the back of me, going, *schwartzze, schwartzze*. She's rubbing my skin. *Schwartzze, schwartzze*. It was not the first time that anybody had kind of brushed up against my skin and going *schwartzze*, you know, for black. But she was going *schwartzze* and was handling me and looking behind me and saying something. I didn't quite understand. My father got it. She was saying in German, "Where's the tail?" Well, just as Hitler had, you know, told her and people, I mean German, Europeans had this thing about, you know, Jews having horns and Hitler reinforced that, they were all — one of the myths was that blacks had tails. This old woman, on some level, believed that, you know. It was 50-something and she's an older German woman so she's lived before World War II, through World War II, blah-blah-blah, and she's lookin' for my tail. And my father says to her in his broken German, you know, "Just get away from us. Neither I nor my daughter have tails and we

never will.” So, not exactly being cracked over the head with a billy club or a hose, but –

ANDERSON: The pain is the same.... What was St. Catherine’s like?

POWELL: St. Catherine’s was nice. We were all in altered states of consciousness there. For them to be these wonderful women that I speak of, and uh, -

ANDERSON: Did you feel isolated, though?

POWELL: Right. Really isolated. And for them to only have, like, two blacks when I get there. There was me and Doreen McKenzie. Doreen McKenzie was from Jamaica. She was quite fun. Dorrie and I used to straighten each other’s hair at midnight, because we didn’t want anybody to see us and smell the grease and all of that. We used to open the window in the cold November, so the smell wouldn’t get out into the dorm. Crock of shit. Is that going to be on the tape?

28:

ANDERSON: It’s OK.

POWELL: Doreen was so regal and so –

ANDERSON: Doreen ended up in the Midwest, poor kid.

POWELL: I know. [laughs]. And the cold, she hated the cold. She hated the — we had an 8 o’clock Saturday zoology class. Doreen came late all the time. And once she came very late and she’s coming, like, Henry II or Henry III, down, down, down the tiered large lecture hall. And the professor stops her. She’s late, she’s got her books, the little skirt and the bobby socks, whatever, ’58, ’59, and he says, you know, “Miss McKenzie, are you aware of the fact that this class begins at 8 o’clock?” And she says, “Of course I am,” she says. “But it’s an ungodly hour to begin a class.” [laughs] Doreen was very much — there was only two of us. But –

ANDERSON: She had a real presence.

POWELL: She had a real presence, and I had a real presence on that campus, you know, in my own way. But I’m saying, we were aware of all the ways in which we were isolated. And of course, I joined the Catholic Interracial Council. It was a part, again, of the kind of the political feeling and the Catholic Interracial Council was doing stuff. Now, after NCCJ — we did those kind of, you know, making yourselves a family and going to the real estate agents and having them show you a house and so the white family got, you know, these things and the black family — and we were documenting all of that for the Minnesota legislature, which actually passed the first Fair Housing Law, in 1959. So, I mean, we

were engaged in that way. We were engaged in our mock UNs and our political debates. We had a political debating club.

ANDERSON: So debate and dialogue about racial justice was really encouraged on the campus.

POWELL: Totally.

ANDERSON: So that even though you were isolated, you felt like it was an atmosphere of that was –

POWELL: I felt like it — that was really, like, trying to deal with these issues. So, when I looked back, and I thought, Yeah, but they couldn't get more black kids? It was, like, What was the problem here? But actually, that actually happened in my junior year. There was like a whole slew, that freshman class had, like, 15 or 20 black kids and then it just, you know, started to flood. And I don't know exactly what they did. At that time, I didn't even have the presence to ask or question. I just was so happy that there was then, like, a presence of black kids in the class.

What I did was, I actually, I was adopted by — and I never knew how exactly — oh, I'm forgetting her name. [Mrs. Marie Wilson] There was a black woman in the black community in St. Paul, Minnesota, who actually called the college and asked for me. And this person — I don't know, had she kind of adopted Sybil? I don't know, but she — there was a black Catholic family that looked for the black students at the school who wanted to come and, you know, just to get away from the college on weekends and come and spend some time in the black community and went to the black church there and so forth. And I spent many, many a time, I mean, this woman came to know my mother, you know, my mother would write her and thank her for having me over at different times.

So in order to really feel my full sense of myself, I had to go into the black community out of St. Catherine in order to, you know, to do that. And that nuns were very — they knew this woman, they were very encouraging of all this. It was really strange times, strange times.

ANDERSON: Were all the nuns in the administration white?

POWELL: White. All of them. Teachers — the only black nun that I ever saw was one summer when I took an extra philosophy. I stayed on campus and did some work with the French — there was a French Institute that was happening, and yeah, that was my work for the summer, and I took her philosophy course, the History of Philosophy. And she came from — remember, I told you they came up the Mississippi so there was a college down in St. Louis, called Fontbonne College? And she came from that college. She was fabulous. And the fact that she taught

philosophy just, like, blew me away. I was totally in love with her. It was, like, ahh. But that was the only —

ANDERSON: Were you able to travel back and forth to Florida for holidays and breaks?

POWELL I didn't. It was '58. I actually came up by plane and I never had traveled by plane. I mean, no, even Germany, we went by boat. So after the second year, I didn't go home except for summer. Because then, I was also into, like, I got a job here, I'm going to do this. I want to go here. And it was usually going home with friends in the area from Iowa to — all of it was closer.

ANDERSON: What was the atmosphere like sexually on campus?

POWELL: Ohh. Interesting. I was a pretty naïve character, so I have no sense of ever anything lesbian going on, and I didn't know from lesbian. It was all just so heterosexually centric or whatever, that it was about dating the guys from the brother school of St. Thomas School, or girls having boyfriends from home or from other places and so forth. So it was a big thing, dates and going out, you know, with boys and dating guys from the University of Minnesota and that sort of thing.

It was a very — I'm trying to find the words. I didn't feel isolated. I wasn't really into dating heavily. Again, I was pretty square but also, I think, probably on some level, although I ended up later getting married and the whole thing before I came out — I didn't come out until I was 30 as a lesbian.

There was something about — I don't really need boys? I'm like, I'm bigger than all that? It's, like, really. And I was really still quite nerdy. It was like, I came to college to get all this knowledge and stuff.

I didn't even — I didn't smoke and I thought people who went into the Smoker, which is what it was called, and played cards and smoked cigarettes, were like totally lost, loose, just hopeless. And it only lasted for two years. I started smoking when I was, like, in my junior year. That summer that I stayed on campus and did the whole thing, and I used to drink Cokes for every study session and the Coke machine ran out and somebody said, "Oh, Kelly" — you know, we called each other by our last names sometimes — "Oh, Kelly, come on, stop that," because I'm kicking the machine, and they said, "Have a cigarette." Or have a fag, is what they were — we were so sporty, you know, you could say that. It had nothing to do with faggot. But, you know, Have a fag. And literally threw a cigarette across. It was a greenhouse, we used to have as a study thing. And I picked it up and I smoked it. And I started smoking at the age of 20. So I would go in the Smoker occasionally, just to smoke, but I don't play cards. I don't do that. It's like, we're in college.

I'm saying all that to give you a sense of, this would be the kind of person who, while you could look at it in a kind of, in a classic way would be, here's black girl-child, black young lady now, young woman, in a context, because the same thing is happening when I was in the military context of — there's a lot of dating and so forth, but I didn't date, because I didn't date the white boys, they didn't ask me, and it was clear it was about race, and then I just got, I don't really need that.

But also, most of the girls who were my girlfriends didn't date. And that — so, in high school, that's — that was more palatable even, for the outside person to look at, and for me to experience. And in college, it was as palatable for me because I just didn't — I was into, you know, my political stuff, and also the foreign students' associations that really branched — expanded out to the other colleges, the University of Minnesota was our biggest — where I had most of my friends who were also international, and so it was such an outlet. And there were lots of boys, I mean, in that circle was Kofi Annan, and so we would have parties and dances and everybody would dance with me. And so it had much more of a European flavor of how you interacted with boys and it wasn't so driven by the American date thing, although that was pretty much the scene, you know, at the campus. I mean, girls used to sneak out of the window and get, you know, detention — not detention, whatever, get grounded, whatever that meant.

But I remember some of the wonderful guys that — we had parties that would go on all night and —

ANDERSON: But no lesbian subtext in that homosocial environment?

POWELL: OK. In that homosocial, OK. I was dwelling on the heterosexual part of it. But in that context, no, not one. I am trying — you know, I've often (both voices) —

ANDERSON: very different from other women colleges —

POWELL: — Betty Jean, NO, NO.

ANDERSON: No rumors about the nuns?

POWELL: But see, do not — no, do not take that. And, you know, this is an historical document? Don't say, at the College of St. Catherine, nobody ever heard a rumor or said a rumor. Betty Jean never heard it, or being connected. And so their universe is within your universe on that campus and I am sure — I can't imagine that there was not —

ANDERSON: But your radar wasn't tuned to it at that point? You were not —

POWELL: No, no —

ANDERSON: – amongst your peers or your educators, or none of that. So, you did not have a sort of budding lesbian awareness or consciousness?

POWELL: I did not. I did not. I did not. I tell you where I actually — it was held up to me as, This could happen to you at St. Catherine's and beware. Go back to that little high school group of mine in, at Booker T., the ones of us who were our, you know, our little gang, of wonderful people. Charles Williams — no, Charles Johnson. Charles Williams was the principal. Charles Johnson was one of the boys in our group whom I liked a lot. He was boyfriend to somebody else but he and I — we just had this, like, very — you know, how you tried on your mature thing, you know, so we could try on our mature thing with each other so we would, like, counsel each other and advise.

So here we are, one of our last of several of our graduation parties and we're sitting on his lawn, it was held at his house, and we're sitting out on his lawn, so it's the two of us, it's like, you know, we had to have our quiet moment for our last little whatever. And so we're sitting on his lawn and he's saying, "Now, Betty Jean, you're going up to this Catholic girl's school." I said, "It's a women's college." I remember saying that. He says, "I don't care what it is." He says, "You're going to have to watch out." And I knew where he was going, but I didn't know. It's like, I never even heard — but I knew this and so, this was the time for Charles to have the talk with me.

And he said, "There will be some girls who will try" — and I don't even know what he said — try what? What the language was, but he gave me to understand that — because I knew there was one rumor that we had heard — not rumor, I mean, we came to know it was true, that the guidance counselor of our high school's daughter was "funny" — we called it. That's what they called them. She was "funny." And she went away to, like, Fisk, or somewhere, and she got sent home because she was, like, messin' with girls and the whole thing. So there was this whole shame and it was, like, you could mess up your life. And so, he recalled her to me, I know that. And he said, "And so you just want to be careful." And he didn't do anything more with it. He didn't get, like, overboard or anything. And that's the truth. And so, you just be careful because they'll, like, really mess you up or whatever. And that was all.

And so I took it, and it made me a little shaky, but I was, like, "You don't know what you're talking about, Charles. That's not going to happen to me. And that's not, like, really." And so maybe I just purposely totally shut that out from — but it's not like I didn't have all kinds of wonderful relationships and rolling down hills with girls and doing all kinds of stuff. Mmmm.

We just — the one, um, that I had for myself and it had nothing to do with anything except that there's this gorgeous friend of mine, oh, I had her name and I just now lost it. Her name often comes to me, but it

was a very — she was very Scandinavian, Mary Jo something, like Johansson. Anyhow, she and I did philosophy together and we really liked it and we did French. And she was going to be a physical therapist, whatever. And we were both very, very naughty inside, in our own way, like, we loved to do little things that were different but not silly things, but some, just a little something off.

And so, we both had this thing that we wanted to climb up the bell tower, and our chapel on campus was really quite lovely. It was modeled after a couple of different French small cathedrals and the actual doors were designed, based on the doors in Vezelay? No, south of France. I remember going there and seeing the doors somewhere in the south of France. So, we knew all this stuff. The architecture — and the *campanile* was really, like, really one of the tallest in the city, and the college was already on a hill kind of thing, and we just wanted to have the height of getting all the way to the top of it and looking out over the Mississippi, St. Paul, Minneapolis, da-da-da-da-da, and we were going to do it. And it was fucking high. We didn't realize how high until we started climbing this thing. This ladder went up for days. And we used to climb, but it seemed like ten stories high, but it probably wasn't that high.

So we'd been kidding each other that we were going to do this since, I don't know, maybe freshman year, so by the time we get to senior year, it was, like, you know, piss or get off the pot. So we had to do it and so you had to crawl up into the choir, stand in the church, in the chapel, and it had to be a time when the chapel was open — it was always open, but for some reason, we had to wait after the nuns had had choir practice, so it was all very thrilling for us, and we did.

And I can remember, with Mary Jo crawling behind me, and grabbing onto my leg and saying, "Don't you leave me," and so forth. And I'm feeling this thing, like, it was my first really butch impetus, and looking back and seeing this gorgeous — she's holding onto me, and it was, like, "Oh, yes!" I'm in power here. I mean, I was totally in a heterosexual — you know, I was a heterosexually formed little creature that clearly, this, you know, my whole lesbian self, you know, and persona that was down there were just — that was really one of the first little peeking up for a moment. And it really gave me the strength — I have to do this. And we did. And we got up to the top of the thing and it was, like, you know, Quasimodo on top of — it was like, oh, we had the power. I'll never forget that view. So, it's just that that little Sappho-centric moment. (both voices) It was as exotic as it ever got in terms of my own life experiences, which is a lot of verbiage to say nothing in terms of — didn't happen. It didn't happen there and I didn't — but I'm sure it was.

ANDERSON:

So, before you married, I mean, we really don't have time to go into it on this tape, but just as a wrapping up that thought. Before you married

Bill, though, I think you said you had had one sexual experience with a woman.

POWELL: I did. How did you know that?

ANDERSON: I think you talked about it in *Word is Out*.

POWELL: Oh, I did, yes. Fine. I was just wondering — did I say this in a letter to you that I don't remember? Yes, I did, and that was all very interesting. We both coming from different —

ANDERSON: A different period.

POWELL: A different time period. Um, I'm in graduate school. Shortly after, though. Shortly after.

ANDERSON: Right. OK. So, we really —

POWELL: And that was holding two things in the balance at that time, but it was a very full, rich —

ANDERSON: Do you get married at the point that you go to grad school? Or do you meet Bill in New York?

POWELL: I meet Bill in New York, right, while I'm just finished grad school, still living with the same roommate and all those sorts of things. So I will go into that whole story later.

ANDERSON: OK. So I think we're going to have to turn it off, for now.

POWELL: OK. This is good.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ANDERSON: The 1960s, with this hour of tape, is what we want to talk about. Would you like to just start by talking about moving to New York and the change in your life that happened after you graduated from college?

POWELL: Uh-hm. Well, end of college and I found myself in the process of deciding where to go to graduate school, which was at that time, you know, it was a given was that you were going to go on with your education, especially given the field that I had chosen, which was French Language and Literature — like, what do you do with it, with a BA. So I ended up choosing to go to Fordham University in New York City and that opened up for me, just even in my head at that time, several possibilities of again living — not again, but in my head, clearly always I wanted to be living large and expansively and so forth.

So here we were traveling, you know, now from Minnesota back to the Northeast but the notion that it was New York City. It's, like, possibilities for life. And indeed it was. I got here and, you know, went to Fordham, got totally engaged in the life of New York in all kinds of ways, from your music, art, culture, and the politics.

The politics was the civil rights movement. And the civil rights movement was, let's see, we're talking '62, and it's New York, and the tensions that are here did not lend themselves to feeling like you were in a really cohesive organized piece of the civil rights movement but there were just parts of it here and there that you would get yourself engaged in.

And so I found myself, in a sense, what I describe as I was part of the peripheral civil rights things that were going on around, in particular, young people and youth. And I worked with — summers always found me in Harlem, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, working with what were called then the Street Store Academies and, I mean, they were just — the potential for educating young people who had been totally dismissed by the system, had been dropped through the cracks, et cetera, was just so clear that it found me engaged in protest and demonstrations at the school board for more access to their resources. Not within the school system itself, but to give support to the Store Front Academies, and so that was just a big push that was — it couldn't have happened without the civil rights movement being percolating, and moving.

So I was engaged in that way, engaged in some of the stuff around welfare and women's health from the point of view of the young people that I worked with. When I would go home with them, I did a lot of counseling with them and it would take me into their homes and then there's their mother's stories and those stories led me to, you know, question people at the agencies that I worked with about, you know, What are we doing for women, you know, on welfare? And this woman,

I would tell a woman's story. Actually, it wasn't so much, What are you doing for women, but What can we do for this one woman? And from that, led me to, oh, my God, it's not just this one woman, it's, you know.

So here I'm teaching French, basically, but during the summers, the summers opened up my political world and in particular, the lives of black people, Latino people, because I worked in East Harlem also. And so notion of the civil rights movement, which, in a sense, I had felt had passed me by, because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, literally, in talking '57, '58. I'm in Minnesota, I can remember in '59, or '60 or so, I'm writing mother and father and saying, "OK. That's it. I have to leave St. Catherine's and I need to go to a college in the South, so that I can be a part of the civil rights movement." Of course they write back and say, "I don't think so. You have a full scholarship. You're staying right where you are."

So my learning the, you know, we shall overcome, was standing on the steps of the University of Wisconsin — at that moment. I have to have been at a mock UN — again historically, it's so interesting to see that Kofi Annan, who is now the secretary general was of course at that mock UN and played the role of the secretary, no, he didn't play the role of the secretary general. He was from Ghana in that context. But these students from the civil rights movement were traveling the country, going to various colleges and universities to get people to come down South for the summer and I remember sitting at the top of the stairs and they were down and saying we will teach you the song of the civil rights movement. It was very symbolic of how I felt like I had not — well, again, the periphery of the civil rights movement, but very much in it at the same time.

So anyhow, here I am in New York and I'm doing this and I — that was a real, it wasn't like an awakening, because my consciousness was awake. It was the being able to begin into the movement that really, not the movement, the political — not the civil rights movement, but just human movement of working with the issues of class and the issues of race and the issue of gender oppression, and the issues of youth and education and quality of education and the lack thereof. And, oh, employment and those things were just —

ANDERSON: What neighborhood were you living in at that time?

POWELL: I was living actually in — where was I? Alternately in the Upper East Side, that's where my first apartment was — and you have to know this is what, the year after my first year in graduate school. I stayed up in the Bronx in a women's residence, and then a friend of mine and I decided, you know, we just have to break out. This is enough, because our parents had wanted us to stay in some place protected. So we looked for someplace where we could say, "Oh, well, there's a doorman, there's somebody to protect us." Again, really privileged, but the rent was —

for each one of us was \$90 a month. There was, you know, an apartment on 80th between York and East End — John Lindsay made a big push in developing the Upper East Side, so some of these renovated or newly constructed high-rise apartments you'd go by and they would advertise, you know, concession, six months free rent, which is what we got. And so, for \$180 a month, six months free rent, we stocked away. So it was \$90 a month.

That's where — and then, I married, and moved to Chelsea, and then, when my husband and I separated and divorced, I moved to the Upper West Side. And it's during those times that I am working alternately summers and then I actually become a part of the Human Resources Administration and work for the Manpower and Career Development thing, where I was the Deputy Director of Youth, of the Education Department in the Human Resources of New York for a two-year period. And that I went towards that position out of the experiences of working in Harlem, East Harlem, a little bit in the Bronx.

So those were the beginnings of a political engagement that came from a consciousness that had already been set in motion back in Florida and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, but also —

I talked about my father, that moment in a restaurant where he tells me, you know, Where you are is where you belong in the world. And the traveling with him and the living in a context where we had to really deal with racial oppression, or racism, and, in some ways that were hugely significant to us, though, again, in a context of some privilege, and all of that — and I put all of that together because there was a sense of, you stand against injustice coupled with a sense of great entitlement on my part. An entitlement, not from a point of view of I'm entitled to anything more than somebody else, but it was real — it came from my father and I've been — in this moment I continue to be working on this, I see it now as part of a spiritual journey of a human being, to stay grounded and rooted in a certainty of one's own preciousness and uniqueness and whatever. And if you're grounded in that for yourself, in the most spiritual way, you know that every other single person also has it.

And that's what so informed and drove my movement more and more to political action. Because I began to recognize how clearly systems of negation of people based on gender, based on race, and then when I embraced my lesbianism, and based on class, and when I embraced my lesbianism at the age of 30, I found myself having landed in the same territory, it's like, whoa, and based on sexual orientation. Not that, you know, somebody said, Well, God, didn't you know that? Well I didn't. I didn't have a sense of lesbian-gay in that, in any political way when I was in my heterosexual mode, as being very much a part of that continuum of human oppression and what people are capable of. So, it was like, and this, too? And it all just — it really came together. It's all of a piece.

There's ways in which, you know, human beings' preciousness and uniqueness is not only just negated, but then all kinds of blocks to access, to the basics that one needs in order to just be able to find your humanity and your uniqueness. So, blocks to quality education and to employment and to, you know, access to civil life, to the civic life, and representation of yourself —

Sometimes when I hear myself talking, it feels like I am, that, you know, ohh, you're talking abstractions here. But it was — the flesh and blood of those young people. It's so funny that it's summer: summer always brings to mind those young people in Harlem who were so much a part of my instruction in the ways of being politically engaged in the world. Not that they were politically engaged. It was the nature of their lives that kept opening and opening my eyes. I'm talking the, you know, the 14- and 15- and 16-year-olds that I was counseling through a neighborhood youth corps program that I was, you know, traveling with to various venues, because we were counseling them, they were being counselors in camp situations or, you know, Harlem's Children's Carnival, you know, situations of artistic and creative summer programs. They were counseling younger people. And so we would travel with them, with their young charges, different places in the summer.

And then, the young people that I would see once I was part of the education department and effort in the Human Resources Administration, that I would see who had then been left behind by the system as, you were uneducatable, you are totally destined for prison and drugs and so forth, and seeing them sitting in a GED program or a Store Front Academy, and totally defying those obstacles and those negative assessments of themselves. They're the life and blood kinds of — they're just the reality that informed my politics.

ANDERSON: What was your awareness of the gender oppression at this time?

POWELL: Growing in the sense of first of all just dealing with the women that I was dealing with. It was always — I'm hesitating here because it was always a pull, and I'm a little bit confusing. When you're dealing with black and Latino women and you know, in that moment, that they're suffering oppression because they're women but you're always trying to think of, having to think of, the men as far as what is the nature of the oppression that they were suffering.

So, it kept me, like, a little bit not fully coming into my analysis of the gender oppression because I was always trying to balance, you know, this is oppression, this is oppression, the women have got it differently. But as the women's movement was sort of, you know, around the periphery of my consciousness, I'm hearing about it, I'm reading a little bit, I'm whatever, and going then more and more into analysis, you know, getting angrier and angrier and just seeing more of

what was to me just, OK, a part of the oppression of race, just where we were beginning to tease it out and seeing just the distinct oppression that was totally, you know, based on gender.

So, it's increasingly a part of my awareness and I begin to feel the — how can I say — the liberation of myself. It was like it was in the air and even though I wasn't formally hooked into any feminist organization or entity or activity at this time, so I'm going into the 70s now, I felt so empowered by the fact that this was in the air and this was — I mean, this was a possibility, not just for women in the abstract but for myself. And I knew I began to live my life like that.

I mean, actually, I went through being a teacher at Cathedral High School and Department, Chair of the French Department, et cetera, engaging my students in anti-Vietnam activities, and even in that context, I was beginning to have some sense of gender oppression [other] than just the struggle in the antiwar movement of the guys running everything, you know. And my students questioning this and I was teaching at an all-girls high school, and my students questioning this, when we would go on marches and all this kind of thing. So, yeah, it was coming in, and in many different kinds of ways.

ANDERSON: And before we move into the 70s and we talk about that, let's talk about your marriage a little bit, because you're also married to a man during this time. So talk about what was your marriage was like and speak, specifically, to the gender arrangements within that marriage.

POWELL: Interestingly enough, it was a very short-lived marriage, and a very not bound by the gender roles as much, given the nature of who we were. I already had my master's. I was teaching. Bill was working in a bank, Chemical Bank, at the time.

17:

ANDERSON: Is this when you become Betty Powell and not Betty Kelly?

POWELL: Yes, exactly. Bill Powell. And he wanted to go on with his graduate studies, da-da-da-da, back and forth. And as it turned out, you know, we decided that it was literally one of those arrangements where you go back to school, I'm working, and you know, I basically took care of the expenses. Not totally because he also worked part-time when he went back to school, but for a while part-time and then at some points, full time because we were trying to get, you know, to get it more quickly. And so, this is interesting and as I reflected back on it, I just — I was instinctively a feminist, long before I named it and called it because it was very clear to me in the marriage that there was no way that I could play the role of I am less than. And then, that particulars that I just described, the circumstances were such that, of course, I'm not.

And Bill Powell himself, as it turns out, and of course I describe this in *Word is Out*, I think, as it turns out, was a gay man and I didn't even

know — I didn't know that. He knew that. He was in this marriage out of, you know, came from a Catholic tradition, too, and had been in a minor seminary, and came to this from that classic position of, If I get married, this will go away, and so forth. And it didn't. And we had the kind of relationship where — I mean, we really did love each other.

And so, he went to great pains to figure out how to tell me when it was finally too much, you know, for him, and we were clearly having real tensions in the marriage and so forth. And it was quite — again, if we just, you know, did a video of just that piece of my life and story, it was again a very tender moment when he comes with one of our dearest friends who was a psychologist, to have Jim be there to support me and answer any questions or this or that. And of course, I totally fell apart when he told me. And his wish was that we figure out some way to stay together with this — again, he's coming from that place of, you know, this can work out and I'll go to therapy and I'll be, you know, I'll be changed and better and all that sort of thing.

So it was a very, you know, difficult six or eight months that we really tried this with him wanting it to work, and I'll never forget moments of just this intense silence had fallen over the relationship at dinner table and we're hearing nothing but the clinking of the silverware on china and out of this silence, he just sort of wails this plea, he says, "Well, Leonard Bernstein does it." And I go, "What? Are you insane? You're not Leonard Bernstein. I am not going to be your wife and you're gay." Oh, so there are many incredible stories I could tell you about the manifestation of the love and the reality at the same time, of the fact that this is who he was and he finally had to come to it. And it was — I did not — and I cannot say that, Oh, and I knew that I was gay, because I didn't.

ANDERSON: It didn't trigger anything like that? (two voices, unclear)

POWELL: Not that that was me. I just went on after that, and then after we separated, I was kind of the gay divorcee. And for me, very personally, I was still coming out of that Catholic ethos and so, I had been a virgin when I got married and then, but once we were married, it was, OK, that's it. I'm now, you know, I'm free, and I was also freeing myself from the church because the ecumenical thing to me was not shaping up to be all that I, you know, continually wanted the church to be and I was questioning that, and leaving it. So I continued being heterosexual for another few years. But the feminist movement and the impact of that on me was, unbeknownst to me, in a sense, was opening my heart up to where I could be really free to recognize love for me, you know, however it came.

ANDERSON: Once you did come out, did that change how you thought about your marriage to Bill? Did you think, then, well, this is how we were able to have the arrangement that wasn't traditional, in terms of gender roles?

POWELL: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, that became so clear, and it was also so clear that this marriage was a part of my journey on the way to — I mean, ultimately, Bill ended up moving to San Francisco and living his life and, you know, was a wonderful sociologist and we became — he actually, you know, for some — well, not for some reason, I mean, because I was in a moment, in a small little historical moment, had somewhat of the, of the reputation of a gay leader or in that, you know, category, so he clearly heard about me because we were all becoming so visible at that time, in the 70s.

So by the time the word is out, the story that I got from him is that he's setting himself up with a lover to watch *The Word is Out*, as people did in their homes and so forth, and he says to his lover, he says, "I bet Betty Jean is in this," he said, "because she's always, like, once she gets onto something, she'll be on the bandwagon." And he was surprised and elated and not surprised at the same time when he saw me in the film. And then he connected with me. He was in the San Francisco Gay Male Choir. They would come here annually for a few years, during the course of a few years and do a concert with the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. He came out to Brooklyn to the home where Ginny and I was and that sort of thing. So, ultimately, it was real.

But in terms of the clarity about how that sort of instinctive empowerment, entitlement, you know, feminism without having its name was a part of who I was and Bill being who he was, we were able to have, yeah, a marriage and a relationship that was not your typical, you know, one-up-one-down power dynamic. And as I went on to live my life after that and be more and more informed by the feminist movement, I found myself falling in love with a woman which, again, I didn't recognize it until I had to kind of confront myself. Literally confront myself in a mirror. What are you doing? Feeling so excited about going out with a woman.

ANDERSON: So we're on the cusp, really, of two awakenings —

POWELL: Uh-huh.

ANDERSON: and I know you've said that they're very much intertwined. So let's pick one and start with one and then it'll weave into the other: either the coming out and realizing your true sexuality, or the feminist awakening and getting involved politically. So even though these two stories will interweave, let's pick one and talk about your growing awareness and relate it to yourself.

POWELL: Well, let's go with the coming out because in essence, the growing consciousness of feminism was there and I began to read and be aware and listen to what was happening in television and seeing what was happening in movies, et cetera. But the actual engaging began by engaging from the place of being lesbian. OK. And that then connected me and with the feminist movement and then my affirmation of myself as a black lesbian feminist, always, every time that I spoke, came together.

So the coming out, so there I am, you know, I've been high school teacher, worked with human rights, been engaged in the antiwar movement, peripherally with the black civil rights movement, engaged with the cultural nationalism, if you like, black movement, in a big way, some of the black artists and musicians, the theater, et cetera, and now, teaching at Brooklyn College, and at Brooklyn College, I reconnect with a colleague who taught in the high school, where I taught, Virginia Apuzzo, as she's also teaching at Brooklyn College. And we eventually, you know, began to have lunch together a little bit as colleagues, and then dinner together, and this is the person in fact — I begin to realize that I'm in love with. And it didn't absolutely surprise me.

Now, I want to complicate the story a little bit, because I actually had had a relationship with a woman, and I wouldn't say an affair, it was a relationship and it was a deep relationship with a woman prior to that, never having named it as lesbianism.

ANDERSON: There was no sexual component?

POWELL: Oh, there was a sexual component. There was a major sexual component to it. This is just to confuse people.

ANDERSON: But you didn't have the language?

POWELL: Didn't have the language. This is when we were in graduate school, the roommate that I refer that we got the apartment together, et cetera. But I hold that we can be too rigid in saying lesbian or not lesbian. I mean, I'm definitely lesbian now, or have been since I declared myself, always will be. But I see us as, you know, as human beings, as clearly androgynous creatures, and so we have terms called bisexual, or certainly Samira and I were living a very androgynous bisexual existence in that moment. But the part of us that loved each other was absolutely very real, but we were also very clear. Here we are, you know, 21, 22, 23 years old and 24 and we're clear that we're going to get married. That the culture has instructed us to do that and we like boys and so forth, but we love each other. And so we were doing both. We were very much — we belonged to each other. We used to say that, you know, I belong to you, you belong to me.

And so there we are in the Upper East Side and living our lives and teaching and going to graduate school and doing a little social work. We did our own kind of social work thing and that was out of my stuff in Harlem. And she's, you know, beginning to date her future fiancé and husband. And he, her fiancé, brings Bill Powell in my life. He says, "I know the perfect person for you." And Bill Powell comes to the door, of Sammy and my apartment with flowers in his hand. But we didn't have the language for it. And eventually we decided there was something wrong with this because it would get in the way of us really being fully free for our marriages.

So, boom, arranged the marriage, and we did the marriage (unclear). But still, when Bill Powell tells me that he's gay, I'm like, "What? What is that? How could you do that? We're married! What does that mean?" and it just didn't — and that's — in some ways, a very hard thing for people to compute. It's, like, What? And you didn't know then that you were lesbian? No. It was, like, I go on, we divorce, and I go on doing my heterosexual life.

So here now, the feminist movement opens that up. I'm now, what, five years later, four years later.

ANDERSON: You're now aware of the identity lesbian? I mean, other possibilities for your life?

POWELL: Yeah. I'm somewhat aware of the identity lesbian, but I'm aware of the identity gay from Bill. I am not so fully aware of the identity lesbian. No, I'm aware of the identity gay and I'm aware of the identity feminist. Lesbian, not. But then, so here I am in my own life circumstances, engaging with this woman and just finding this the absolute last word. This is the cat's meow. This is like, Oh my God, Oh my God. And realizing that, hmm, I can always only describe it in the same way I did thirty years ago. There was this line to cross. I got very clear. And then, there was something about the way that Sammy and I were together that did kick up and said, Sammy and I crossed the line but we didn't name it. It wasn't a public statement. It wasn't — whatever.

So, here it was. Oh, no: this is your life. You're now choosing your life that is going to be other than what you were instructed to be. And so you have to step across this line in a very conscious way, and I did. And I stated this to this woman that I loved. That I loved her and that this is what I want. And of course, there's, you know. In my little life story, there's the classic moment which so many people have heard, of you know, Ginny jumping up off the couch and knocking the lamp over and going, "What? You're black, you're a woman, and now you want to be gay? You want to be a lesbian?"

And it was interesting that she put it that way because it is so much exactly what I was saying yes to. Not just yes to being a lesbian. There was no way that I could just say, "I'm going to be a lesbian" and then

other, whatever, somehow, that extracted out of the whole of me. The whole of me comes like this: black, a woman, and a lesbian. And so, I said to her, “Yes!” [laughs] And we went on to say yes to our love and to our lives together, which lasted for a ten-year period, you know, a very good and interesting and exciting, challenging marriage relationship.

ANDERSON: What were some of the challenges? You allude a little bit in *Word is Out* [phone interrupts]. What I wanted to ask about was something that you say in *Word is Out*, which is that the racial conflict between you and Ginny was minimal, so it makes me think about what were — it might have been very minimal, but what were some of the challenges and some of the joys of this partnership? Not just between two individuals, Betty and Ginny, but given, like you said, black, gay, female with Italian-American. I mean, in this particular historical context. What was it like for you to at Brooklyn college, in your neighborhood, amongst your communities? How did those differences get played out? The joys and the pain.

POWELL: Yeah. Some of the difficulties were clearly racial. I mean, the conflict between us was minimal but the conflict and the tensions of the reality of us was there between us, and we worked very hard to, like, minimize it for each other, if you like, the impact of the world coming at us in terms of the race. Or to support each other in whatever ways we can.

I'll give you an example of, as we [were], you know, just becoming just increasingly feminist in the context of having embraced our lesbianism and getting slowly into the lesbian-gay movement, I'm concerned and some of the discussion at home is about my connecting with black feminists, and where are they and how do I? et cetera.

And Ginny coming home one day and saying, “Honey, honey, I got it. I've got such wonderful news for you.” And I go, “What?” “I was just hearing on the radio, there's this organization, the National Black Feminist Organization, and they meet every” — and she had gotten all the information. Ah, yes, and this was indeed the National Black Feminist Organization that was founded by Eleanor Holmes Norton and Faith Ringgold and a person whom I want to give the name to and I — ah, why is her name is escaping me, but a black lesbian woman who now lives in California and her name's going to come. [Margaret Sloan] But anyhow, the three of them.

It was just an amazing kind of a story of it, was that they decided that there needed to be a National Black Feminist Organization. Eleanor Holmes Norton, I think at that time, was probably the consumer rights, you know, commissioner here in New York State or something in New York City before she goes to Washington to EEOC, et cetera. Before or after? I can't remember. So she of course had the caché. Faith Ringgold was still just a fairly well known but struggling artist and the other

woman didn't really have a public front but they were able to call a press conference and announce National Black Feminist Organization when I think it was just the three of them.

But it gave that opening and so, anyhow, so here Ginny comes home and does that. So I do. I join the National Black Feminist Organization and that was a major piece of my growth as a feminist and my ability to act and actualize myself, that part of myself that was the black woman being feminist, and the black woman being a feminist who was lesbian, and had the struggle around the lesbian piece in the context of that feminist organization as we were, all lesbians were, struggling within the context of feminist organizations.

ANDERSON: We'll talk more about that.

POWELL: Yeah, we'll talk more about that. OK. So, there was that instance of the recognition. There was no denial in our relationship, that I had to find space to be myself, that Ginny had to deal with however she dealt with being a white woman in a relationship to a black woman and so, let's say the struggle of that coming up in this kind of metaphoric way, but it was real that we're '73, 1973, we traveled, we went to Europe for a summer vacation and did, you know, whatever. You fly the \$90 dollars that it was to go to Luxembourg or something, however you flew those days. On Icelandic. And rent a car and start driving all over. On the cheap but with some capacity. So, anyhow, we're doing, you know, France and Germany, and that's when I was back and forth, back and forth, three times before I could finally go back into Germany, talked about that. But Italy and Switzerland and that sort of thing.

But we're in Paris and we were to stay a week and a few days or something, but of course, we ended up staying much longer. And one day, we've done a lot of touring and this and that and so forth, and I go back to the hotel and lie down and Ginny said, "I'm going to take a walk." She took a walk and came back. When I awoke, she was sitting on the bedside over me and just looking at me and crying. She was crying. And I said, "What's the matter?" And she just said, you know, "I just never realized what it was like" — I'm trying to remember exactly how she said it because there were two things in that — what she was trying to say was, like for me to have to walk through the world and never be invisible. Because she was able to walk the streets and feel her invisibility and not have to be visible, she was going, with me. And I'm sure she had that experience in this country, too. It was intensified in Europe, in certain ways.

We had a couple of racial incidents, that were really, you know, and she was totally up in arms about it. But it was like her living with the fact that when we were out, we were always seen. She always had to be seen. And I knew that I always had to be seen and there was no way of getting around it. So, I don't know.

ANDERSON: Do you say you passed in your neighborhood, that you –

POWELL: But in our neighborhood –

ANDERSON: passed as a straight couple, a couple of spinsters that lived together, you weren't visible as a lesbian couple?

POWELL: Oh, no, not that we weren't visible as a lesbian couple. No. There were our parents and friends and colleagues at Brooklyn College who initially, when we moved in together, wanted to cast it as, Oh, great, so they finally come to their senses and they've moved to Brooklyn because they teach at Brooklyn College, et cetera. So that's, you know, how they were seeing us. And some of the neighbors, yes. Some of our neighbors, I think, did want to see it that way. But it was hard to hold that, given the kinds of benefits that we had and the parties and the ways in which, you know, people came and went. And then the signs that went up around the house, all kinds of stuff. And then, of course, when Ginny runs for the political office for the State Assembly and, you know, that was a big discussion.

There were times when pushing the discussion about being out, as an out lesbian, was very much a part of the tension, also, because for me, the minute I knew that I was lesbian, I was out in the world. It was, like, I had to be out. That was the only way that I could reconcile this black and woman and lesbian. Hiding that part was not an option.

No, it's not that there weren't moments and continued to be moments in our lives. You make some selections, like I do. I yell at the bus driver right now, kind of thing. You just want to say in the world once and for all, Betty Jean is lesbian, you know. Or have this Goodyear blimp following you all the time announcing it. It's like, Don't you dare presume that I'm heterosexual, et cetera. And so there are times, you know, you have to choose. But basically, that was that.

So, pushing on that, those tensions in our relationship and saying to Ginny, "You can't run for office and not be out." You know, as an out lesbian. This has got to be a part of it. So no, the neighborhood knew, ultimately.

Some of the challenges in our family, which were unspoken, you know, to this day, my mother still wants to think that the lesbian gay stuff, that's white people. I would say she has had to, this 96-year-old woman, in the last few years, she's had to really get it, because the world has been showing up more faces, black faces, chocolate-brown faces, who are lesbian, gay, et cetera. She's had to declare that. So that, and Ginny's mother had some real concerns. It was race and it was, of course, again, didn't want to admit that we were lesbian.

ANDERSON: But you came out to your family, it sounds like, right away.

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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