

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

MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

March 16–17, 2005
Jersey City, New Jersey

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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Narrator

Born in Selma, Alabama in 1946, Minnie Bruce Pratt is an award-winning poet, essayist, teacher and activist. She graduated from the University of Alabama in 1968 and received a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1979. Pratt found the women's movement in 1974, while living in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and began a new life as an out lesbian, a feminist, a writer, and an activist. Pratt was a member of the editorial collective Feminary, worked with the National Organization for Women, the local rape crisis line and women's center, sat on the Cumberland County Council on the Status of Women, and co-founded WomanWrites: A Southeastern Lesbian Writers Conference and LIPS, a lesbian direct-action group. Pratt's engagement with feminism and antiracism is best known through her cultural activism. Her publications are extensive and include *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, with Elly Bulkin and Barbara Smith (1984); *Crime Against Nature* (1990); *Rebellion* (1991); and *S/He* (1995). For the past ten years, Pratt's activism has been in connection with the International Action Center, the Workers World Party, and the transgender movement. She lives with her partner Leslie Feinberg in Jersey City, New Jersey.

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, Pratt describes her Southern heritage and family background. She reflects on her marriage, its dissolution, and the loss of custody of her children. Pratt describes a distinctly Southern women's movement in the 1970s, offering important insights into the dynamics of race and racism and the politics of sexuality, and discusses in depth the Feminary collective. The interview focuses on Pratt's activism as a writer, the development of her antiracist and anti-imperialist consciousness, and her identity as a femme.

Restrictions

Minnie Bruce Pratt retains copyright to this interview.

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Ten 40-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Minnie Bruce Pratt.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Pratt, Minnie Bruce. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, March 16–17, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Minnie Bruce Pratt interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, March 16, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted MARCH 16–17, 2005, with:

MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

at: Jersey City, New Jersey

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: For the record, this is Kelly Anderson with Minnie Bruce Pratt on March 16th, in Minnie Bruce's [apartment at 127 Chestnut Street] in Jersey City, and we're doing a taping of an oral history for the Voices of Feminism Project at the Sophia Smith Collection. So, let me start with just sort of a general outline of what I hope we can cover over the next couple of hours, just so we can sort of agree on what we might be able to get to.

PRATT: This [sound] is going to come in periodically. This is part of the country in my city apartment.

ANDERSON: What is it? Oh, it's your bird clock.

PRATT: It's a clock and it chirps with a different bird song at the different hours. So, depending on how long we go –

ANDERSON: So I'd like to start talking about family background and your childhood, and then I'm hoping that we'll at least get through the '70s, that we'll be able to talk about going to college and getting married and getting involved with the women's movement in Fayetteville, [about] *Feminary*. Hopefully we can get through that stuff. And then I think that tomorrow will be enough time to do the 1980s and 1990s, which I know is, in some ways, the most rich, because that's when you started to publish, and there's a lot to tell.

PRATT: Yes, although once it's all written down, there's less to tell, in a way. So that sounds doable.

ANDERSON: OK, so we'll try.

PRATT: I think so.

ANDERSON: So we'll try to get up into that point. I think these tapes are going to go until about 40 minutes, so you might see a flashing light there, but I will

certainly give you a couple of minutes' warning when we're about to run out of tape. But, instead of an hour, I think they're about 40 minutes.

So, let's start with your family background. Why don't you just first tell me what you know about the two branches of your family, your grandparents, as far as you know back.

PRATT:

All right. I will tell you something about them and I'll couch it in a certain kind of way. As you know from my work, I tend to take my personal history and turn it in a kind of kaleidoscopic way, and keep looking at it differently and then differently again and then differently again, and gleaning some new insights from that. So, one of the things I've been doing for a while is doing that kind of kaleidoscopic turning with my family history. And it originally started because I was trying to understand the relation of my white family in the South to racism. But it has developed into also looking at class issues, as I've learned more about my family by doing some research.

2:04

Typically for the South, both sides of my family are incredibly well researched genealogically. No one ever talks about this but I'm sure it has its roots in the white South with wanting to know that you do not have African American ancestors. It's sort of an obsession with genealogy. So, I have, on both sides, my mother's side — which is the Browns and the Carrs, the Christophers and the Gilders — and on my father's side, which are the Pratts and the Williamses — I have genealogies that go back to the 1700s.

What's significant about all that to me is this: I don't know so much about my father's side, but I think they came from mid-England. I do know on my mother's side that they were Scot, originally. My grandmother's maiden name was Carr, C-A-R-R, and they were relocated to Ireland as part of the planting of Ireland by England. So, they were poor Scot Presbyterians, who were dissenters in the context of Catholic Scotland, right, and impoverished, and when the common lands of Scotland were being enclosed, of course, all those people lost their land and lost their way of making a living and became renters. And then the rents were driven up, driven up. The rents were driven up and they were vulnerable to being sent by the English to a place that they hoped would be better, Ireland.

So they ended up in the northern part of Ireland and identified from then on as Scot-Irish. And at some point, in the 1700s, they migrated to North Carolina by way of the Netherlands. They came on a Dutch ship, and I think that's that Presbyterian Calvinist connection. Some of the Scot-Irish who passed through the Netherlands ended up in South Africa, and became racist there, having learned all too well from the English how to do that, first in relation to the Irish. And my branch ended up in North Carolina, a little inland from Wilmington. And then at some point they came farther west into Alabama, and settled near the Mississippi border, in a place called Pushmataha — it was Choctaw

land — had a farm there, had a plantation there, owned slaves there, a small farm.

I almost hesitate to call it a plantation, because that evokes Scarlett O'Hara stuff. People who don't know much about the South and the history of the South don't understand that certain areas by their geography and their topography lend themselves to large-scale plantation and certain areas for small farms. My family, because they were not wealthy, they didn't bring big money down from Virginia to buy up huge acreage and start these big, big plantations like in the black belt of Alabama. My family didn't have that much money, but they had enough to get land, on my mother's side, near the Mississippi border. So they had a farm there, [and] I don't know, eight to 15 slaves, probably.

6:25

And some branches of the family went west to Texas as cotton played out, but my mother's current stayed in Alabama. The end of the Civil War marked the peak of their economic ascendancy. That was as far as they got, and then they began to drop economically. My great-grandfather on my mother's side was a butcher, worked for a railroad, was an attendant at the state mental hospital in Alabama, Bryce's — working-class jobs. Well, that was not my great-grandfather, that was my grandfather, who was married to my mother's mother. My grandmother was a schoolteacher but never finished high school herself, got a certificate.

On my mother's side, however, they still lived with this concept of themselves as the gentry. They wouldn't have used that word, gentry, but landowners, even though they had all become working-class people. They had entered the working class without working-class identification.

And the same was true on my father's side. Slightly different history. From England, they ended in Georgia, I'm not sure exactly how, and from Georgia, they came over to Alabama. And my grandfather Williams, who was my father's mother's father, got land in Alabama because he fought for Andrew Jackson in the Creek Wars, and he got a bounty, bounty land, for doing something [seen as] good — bonus land. My father used to tell this story about how jumpy Grandfather Williams was, and when he and his brothers would play and make loud noises around Grandfather Williams, how he would be upset and he would be startled. And it took me a really long time to understand he had Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome from the Indian Wars, probably. So that land was in Bibb County. The land on my father's side was in Bibb County, the land on my mother's side was Choctaw County, in Alabama. Both families [came to Alabama] around 1830 or so.

My father's father, the family on the Pratt side, not the Williams side but the Pratt side, some parts of that family, there were brothers, there were male members of the family who had big holdings, big land holdings, in a lot of — owned a lot of people, a lot of African American people, in Tuscaloosa County. Again, that wasn't true of my father's

grandfather — small farm, eight to 17 people, in terms of people who were enslaved.

They ran a ferry on the Cahaba River in Bibb County. It was called Pratt's Ferry, and it's actually still called Pratt's Ferry. It's now a nature preserve. The Nature Conservancy has bought it because at this ford, it happens to be this great place of ecological confluence, so there're all these plants and little fish and little snails and flora and fauna that only exist right around there. And that is my — when I think of home, it's not [just] here. That place is home for me. It's very beautiful, very, very beautiful, and I have very complicated feelings about it, because it was Native land. I think it was perhaps Creek, although Bibb County's right on the Nations — it's right where the Choctaw hunting land and the Creek hunting land overlap, so I'm really not sure exactly who was displaced. I have very complicated feelings about that land and it makes me very happy that it's not owned by a person anymore, but that it's this place —

ANDERSON: Or a corporation, even worse.

12:35

PRATT: That's right, that's right. And of course, the county is, you know, perhaps 80 percent owned by lumber mills and coal mines, coalmining companies, so it's very difficult in terms of trying to keep anything from being despoiled.

Anyway, again, the end of the war, end of the Civil War, marked the end of my father's side of economic ascendancy, and they began also this journey into the working class. My father's father was a probate judge in Bibb County for — [from the] 1890s, I think that's right, 1892, 1893 — for over 50 years. And so he still owned this land, he was part of the governmental apparatus of the county.

My father, though, led the life of an itinerant working-class man for many years. He just traveled around the country. He once told me he'd worked in every state, he'd held a job in every state but two, and that was before Alaska and Hawaii. Worked in coal mines, worked in tire factories, played ball, played baseball, been a driver for somebody in Hollywood, Hoot Gibson — I mean, just roamed.

When the Depression hit, he came home, and that's where he met my mother. When the family fortunes declined in Choctaw County, her father and mother had moved to Bibb County, where some friends were to try to farm, and that hadn't really worked out, and they continued to live in Centreville, but my mother's father went to work for Tennessee Coal and Iron, which was in Fair Field near Bessmer, and he lived there during the week and then came home on weekends.

And my grandmother, my mother's mother, taught school. There are lots of ins and outs around this. What is significant in terms of class, I think, is that, because of this identification with the owning class that there had been, there was still that identification. So, for instance, my mother's father, my grandfather Brown, worked as a company security officer. He worked for the company. He was part of the — you know,

folks who patrolled the boundaries of the company town and I don't know what he did, you know. I can guess. But I do know that he worked for TCI [Tennessee Coal & Iron] at the same time, roughly the same time, as Bull Connor was chief of security for TCI. So that tells you something about [what] his identity probably was.

So my mother and my father — my father came back after the Depression started, working for his father, [it was a] job he could get, he was like a glorified clerk, and he pretty much stayed a glorified clerk the rest of his life. He worked for his father and then he worked for the Belchers. They're sort of like the Snopeses of Centreville. The Belchers, who owned the lumber mill — there's a whole family of Belchers, and all of the different Belchers, they started as just logging, with mules, out of the pine woods, and all the different brothers, they developed lumber mills. So my father was like a clerk, like a private secretary clerk, for one of them. I think that was after my parents were married.

So they met, my mother was teaching school. She worked for the board of education for a while when my father's brother was elected — this is how it works in these little towns, you know. My father's brother was elected head of the board of education, Uncle Francis, and so my mother and father got jobs there for a while. And then he was voted out and so, I don't know, her brother [Robert Brown] was elected head of the board of education for a while, so maybe they worked a little bit longer. Anyway, I don't have all the dates together, but finally, she went to work for pensions and security. She became a social worker. She had a B.A. in library science but hated teaching. My father started working for the Belchers being a clerk, and that's what they did until they retired, both of them.

I wouldn't say [they] ever identified as working class. They wouldn't have called themselves workers. But then my mother will say things, you know, that shows such a working-class sensibility. So it's a split. It's kind of a split way of being. I wouldn't say that my father ever had that identification. I would say he was thoroughly, thoroughly identified with the owners. He was a member of the White Citizens' Council. I've written about some of this. I can remember when, in the '70s, when I would go home, he would have the Thunderbolt at home, which is [a newspaper] out of Georgia. It's a neo-Nazi movement in Georgia. That would be in the house. So that was ten years or so before his death, so he was unreconstructed in his philosophy.

The men in my father's family were not uniform in their racism. There's a story about my grandfather, for instance, that my cousin Barbara told me. I've written about this little town square [of Centreville], right? The courthouse in the middle, the Baptist church, the Methodist church, the Presbyterian church. And my grandfather Pratt was a Baptist, and in the 'teens, in the 19-teens, he was in church one Sunday morning with his youngest son, Edward, and his second wife, Miss Florence, and the Klan came in robes to worship at the Baptist that day. This was during the rise of the second wave of the Klan in the U.S., and he got up and he said, "I'm not going to worship in any church

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where this is allowed.” And he took his family and he marched out of the Baptist church, down the steps and across the town square into the Presbyterian church, which is how I got to be a Presbyterian. And my cousin Barbara tells this as a very inspiring story about how antiracist my grandfather was.

And of course, relative to the Klan, he was not racist to the degree of the Klan. As a judge, he defended the right of — he wouldn’t prosecute African American people who defended their homes with weapons against the Klan. He wouldn’t prosecute them. But on the other hand, I know from my father that he bought votes. There were a certain number of African American people who were allowed to vote in this county, a very small number, and I know that my father told me about being sent with silver dollars to buy votes during elections.

So, you know, it’s a history of race and racism. The history of my family in connection to it is intricate. My Uncle Francis, I discovered also through my cousin Barbara, would have — when he was head of the board of education, he had African American teachers to his house on Sunday afternoons for coffee. Really, I thought [this was] unheard of, but who knows how much of this was going on behind closed doors? And I’m sure it was part of his managing the system of segregation in whatever way that he was. He and my family were targeted during the ’50s by the Klan with brochures and propaganda, you know. They were clearly seen — he, anyway, was clearly seen as left in the county, and my father was clearly choosing the rightward trend.

So that was the household that I grew up in. I grew up in a very small home. Anybody from any other part of the country who would go and look at this home would say, this is a working-class home, but that wasn’t how I grew up identifying. It’s taken me a while to come to that identification.

ANDERSON: Well, I think that’s one of the functions of race in the South, is to really camouflage that. I think that’s the point.

PRATT: Exactly, exactly.

ANDERSON: Just to keep poor whites from aligning with African Americans. Let’s back up a little bit and talk about — I’m curious to know how you found out that your family were slave owners and how that was talked about in your family, if it was at all.

PRATT: Yes. Never talked about, never, never, never. The way I found out was, um, there were letters on my mother’s side that at some point circulated, because they were — you know, the family was proud of having these letters from the 1850s. And so, the letters circulating, if you read the letters, you see that the people who were writing the letters owned slaves and they talk about it.

On my father’s side, because we had some devoted genealogists — this one cousin in particular wrote up information. And the reason that

21:00

she was open with this information — it's not important but interesting — she was the daughter of my Aunt Minnie Williams. Now Aunt Minnie Williams is my father's sister but the very youngest child, the very, very youngest child. And she was born later, so some of the earlier influences, I think, didn't bear so deeply on her, and one of her older sisters took her on a trip around the world on a freighter, at one point, in the '20s, around the world. My Aunt Betty and my Aunt Minnie Williams, and Aunt Betty's, like, 12-year-old son, they went around the world on a freighter, and I have two candlesticks in the front on the mantel that she brought back from China. I have those, and a bowl, I have a bowl with rose leaves in that she brought back from China.

So these women, these women — who knows what their inner lives were like — they went around the world and when they came back, Minnie Williams didn't want to come home. I mean, surprise, you know. So, they actually stayed in Los Angeles and she went to USC, I think, for her undergraduate education and she just stayed. She never came home. So her family and her daughters were raised in California, and it's that cousin who did the genealogy in a complete enough way that we could understand some of what the family history was.

ANDERSON: And what kind of effect did that have on you and the cousins with which you shared this information?

26:05

PRATT: Well —

ANDERSON: What did it mean to all of you to find this out?

PRATT: I didn't really understand this until I — you see, I didn't really know anything but the myths that had been given me until I started working on being antiracist. I've written some about this. Like, what do you do when you know you've grown up in this racist family? Where do you find your role models? Well, I did try to sort of look around in my family and I uncovered this information, but there was no hope there. And so I had to go outside the family, to the Grimké sisters or Anne Braden or the white Southerners who were in opposition.

So by the time I actually found this information, I had already begun to grapple with what my family was. I mean, in some ways, it was harder to have the direct experience of my father's racism than to know that my great-grandfather and grandmother on both sides were slave owners, you know. That's a terrible thing, but the personal impact of the racism of my father, you know, the most vicious kind of verbalizations and —

ANDERSON: Had you also assumed that that was true about your family past and —

PRATT: I hadn't. But if I hadn't had the education that I had in the South, I would have known that they must have been slave owners. I would have known that, that given the amount of land, given the time period, given

their status, I would have known that they had to have been slave owners, but I didn't know that until I found the actual concrete proof. And that just speaks to how buried the history of oppression is in this country: even someone like me, who's trying to be conscious, couldn't make that leap mentally, until I had the proof in my hands. Of course, I didn't want to think that. You know, I wanted to believe the family myth. Oh, my grandmother, oh, we've always been such good, respectable people, we've always been teachers and sheriffs and you know, lawyers — and this gilding of the —

ANDERSON:

Yeah. And what did it do to any of your family relationships?

29:19

PRATT: It

didn't really change anything. Um, they were already difficult. (laughs) I mean, you know, my becoming an antiracist was part of my coming out as a feminist, as a part of women's liberation, as a lesbian. Things were bad all around, you know. (Anderson laughs) Well, I don't want to — things were very difficult with my immediate family and I don't know if I've ever actually talked about this — I was really estranged from my cousins, not because of how they were with me, but because my mother did this thing about, Don't tell any of my family. Don't tell any of my people. This is the language: Don't tell any of my people. My people? When did they stop being my people and just become your people? But of course, they had when I distanced myself, when I took myself out of that ideology. So I was estranged from my — well, distant from my cousins for a really long time, because I kept trying to get my mother to accept my life. And I thought, Well, she'll accept it, and then I'll be able to talk to my aunts and my cousins. But of course, she wouldn't.

And finally — actually, the dam sort of broke when I published *Crime Against Nature* and it got reviewed in the *New York Times*, and my cousin Bobby, who's about 12 years older than me, or 16 years older than me, and who was in Atlanta and had his own checkered history with the family, called me up and left me this beautiful message on my phone machine about how he just read this review and now he understood what had been going on and how proud he was of me, how proud he was of me. So I called him up and I got to know Bobby and then I told my other cousins one by one and they had thought maybe that was it, or whatever, you know. They weren't terribly surprised, any of them.

ANDERSON:

Tell me about the relationships that you had with the women in your family, with your grandmothers. You haven't written much about that.

31:50

PRATT:

No, no. I wrote some in "Rebellion," actually, an early essay I wrote about them, and my — the grandmother I was named for, Minnie Bruce Williams, was — I was born on her birthday. She was my father's mother, and she died, I believe, in the flu epidemic in 1918, 1919. She died before I was born. She died when my father was 17, so that

would've been 1918, so I never knew her. All I knew about her was that she was a very nervous person. (laughter)

But here's a little story about her that I found out much later. Again, I think this is from my cousin Barbara also — Barbara, who loves to spill the beans. (Anderson laughs) I love Barbara. This is just a side note, but an interesting side note. She was my father's brother's child. She went on to have a life being an administrative assistant in the State Department and was posted to the Philippines and developed a relationship with a Filipino man there and is now married to him. He was very high up in the Aquino government and was like the equivalent of our secretary of commerce. But, of course, she crossed the color line to have that relationship. So she has her whole process of trying to understand the family. She has some stories and she shared them with me.

So this is a story from Barbara. So Grandfather Williams, who was a doctor and was the one who fought in the Creek Wars, and his wife couldn't have children. One day, he goes to his wife and says, "I'm going to ride down into Perry County" — that was the next county over — "and I'm going to bring back a baby, and that's going to be our baby, and this is the only time I'm ever going to talk to you about this." And he goes, and I always imagine him riding on a horse. Now, I don't know, he probably took a buggy, right, and maybe he took somebody with him, but I have this image of him riding in with a baby in his arms, you know, from Perry County. And that was my grandmother Minnie Bruce, who I was named for, who probably was the illegitimate child of someone in Perry County, some woman, and perhaps his child. Although unclear, he was a doctor, so he might hear about these things. But the story is that she begged him on his deathbed to tell her whether he was her father or not, and no one knows what he said to her.

So, I didn't know her. I just have these different family stories. When I was growing up, she was just a nervous person (laughs) who had 13 children, who had 13 children, and, you know, one died in — you know, shortly after birth. All the others lived — a very, very big family.

ANDERSON: And after she died, did your grandfather remarry?

35:30

PRATT: He did remarry, (both voices) he did remarry, although not soon. He remarried rather late, actually. She died in 1918. He didn't remarry until, gosh, I don't know, 30s? I'm not sure when he remarried. No one liked Miss Florence, so I didn't hear much about her. So –

ANDERSON: So she wasn't a grandmother?

PRATT: She wasn't, no, she wasn't a grandmother — I don't remember anything about her. I remember him. Well, I don't know if I remember him. I have stories that feel like I remember him, but I really don't remember. I didn't know him. My father and my mother and I lived with him in the

house on Depot Street when he was — at the end. But really, on my father's side of the family, it was the men who were more significant, really. I mean, somebody who was always telling me I was just like my father — you're just like your father. Oh, the Pratt men, they have the most beautiful manners.

Although people would say I was like my Aunt Betty, because she was a great talker, a great talker and a great storyteller. And I was charmed by her, but there was also this other side, these stories about how she would go to bed and stay in bed for days at a time. There's a sort of a history of manic depressiveness on that side of the family. All the men were alcoholics — all of them, all of them. My grandfather was, you know, a raging alcoholic. The only time he lost an election was when he took his clothes off and ran naked through the streets of Centreville at one point when he was drunk. He lost the election that year, you know. That was also the year when —

ANDERSON: But they reelected him? (laughter)

PRATT: They reelected him the next time around, that's right. It was also the year the Klan was targeting him. Interestingly — I know you know this, but other people might not — during the 'teens, the Klan was the government in many, many states: Indiana, Alabama, other places. And so Klan interests were in power in Alabama, and they started auditing his books, trying to prove that he had misused money. So he was out for two years or something. He was back in again, right? Anyway, mostly on my father's side, it was the men who were the important people. Now, on my mother's side, it was the women.

ANDERSON: OK. Let's pause there and I'm going to put a different tape.

38:00

END DVD 1

DVD 2

ANDERSON: (filming Pratt family photographs) So let me — I'll just try to pan that. I got it.

PRATT: Well, you know, I'm not going to go into all these people. This is my grandmother Ora, my mother's mother, and my grandfather. She was Ora Carr. She's one of the Carrs. And this is my grandfather Brown. And these are more — actually, my Aunt Ora Gilder did this for me, so there's some Pratts and Browns in here but I won't go into all of them.

This was taken very soon after they were married in the late 1890s and they were in New Orleans, I think at the time, and he was working on the railroad. They saw *Ben Hur* there in New Orleans, with real chariots. That was one of the family stories. (laughter)

And this is the same family. This is my mother's side of the family. This is also my grandmother Ora, much later in her life, as you can see. And I love this picture [of the Browns] very, very much, because everybody's in it. All my mother's siblings, all the cousins, and spouses. Way back here in the back, you can see Julian Martin, who was married to my double first cousin Ruth. He was the quintessential heat-of-the-night law enforcement officer in Choctaw County. He worked for fish and wildlife. No telling what he was up to. Anyway, I love this picture, because everybody's looking straight ahead at my Uncle Carroll, who's taking the picture, and I am here —

ANDERSON: Except for you.

PRATT: Looking in the opposite — looking at something else with my hand on my hip.

ANDERSON: Saying, I am so out of here. (laughter)

PRATT: It's like, there's something else going on. There's something else going on here, and I'm trying to figure out what it might be. I really, really love this. And this was taken down by the Cahaba. The Brown side of the family didn't own land on the Cahaba, but I believe that we went. This is some Pratt land that we got loaned for the day, and I don't even know —

ANDERSON: What house is that?

PRATT: What house it is. Somebody's house on the Cahaba. Anyway, so here, you can see, here's my grandma, Grandma Ora; my Greataunt Janie — Auntie, we called her; Evie, who was my mother's sister; my mother, looking very attractive; my Aunt Lethean here; Ruth, my cousin Ruth — and they were a force. They all married men who were much less willful than they were, just to be on the safe side, right? They all worked. They were all working women, every one of them.

One of the lessons that I osmosed from the women on my mother's side was that I had to be able to take care of myself. And that's what I meant when I said there's this ambivalence around working class and the propertied class in my family, the old farmers and the farming interest and what was real now — it's like, OK, that's who we are, but you'd better be ready to take care of yourself. No fooling around. So I always knew I was going to have to work. I never thought anyone was going to marry me and take care of me. For one thing, I saw the men in the family on my mother's side — they weren't capable of taking care of anybody. I mean, really, they couldn't. I mean, they could, you know, manage to sort of hold up their own end, some of them, but it was clear the women were having to work very hard.

3:11

And I learned from those women to work really, really hard. My grandmother knew how to work, as someone who had grown up on a farm, so she knew how to make things. Everything: soap, card wool for comforts — I mean, you name it, she knew how to make it, because she was from that generation where you made everything. And my mother also: made all my clothes when I was growing up, worked full-time, made all my clothes, did some cooking. I just learned how to work from them. That's what I learned. And I learned to be very stoic and to just not let anything stop me. And I learned that I shouldn't expect to be happy, and I learned that I shouldn't be selfish. That was a terrible thing to be, to be selfish, to look out for yourself. It's a terrible thing to believe.

ANDERSON: Now, a lot of this stuff is so gendered, of course. I mean, they weren't raising their sons that way too. What else did you learn from your mother or your extended family about being female? You've written a little bit about — well, you've written quite extensively about all the Southern rules around etiquette and lady-ness, but —

5:40

PRATT: Well, what was kind of interesting about my mother's side of the family was that all of that stuff about being a lady was really from the outside. The women in my family were not ladies in that way. For one thing, my mother — when I was growing up, this wasn't true, but as she got older, she much preferred wearing men's clothes, men's trousers, men's pajamas, men's, you know, golf shirts. She's a very big woman, she's bigger than me. I'm sure it's more comfortable. But it's not just that, you know. These are country women, working women. They were not — again, they were not of the class that could indulge in ladylike-ness.

ANDERSON: In terms of appearances, but in terms of behavior —

PRATT: In terms of appearance, well, even that, I would say, I was acculturated to be — I mean, these beauty pageants that would sort of groom us, right, to have a certain appearance and a certain way of being, even if only briefly, right? But what was happening every day, I just didn't fall into that category. I mean, that feels almost like a more urban

phenomenon. This little lumber mill town — I mean, I knew people who I thought of as ladies, but they weren't my mother. They were not working. They could play bridge. They dressed up a lot, you know, and had little bridge parties. There weren't that many of them. There were just a few of them, because in terms of income and class status, the town couldn't support that many.

So I learned more about being a woman, you know, and less about being a lady. And being a woman meant — well, it was complicated and I think because — well, it's hard to speculate about this stuff in terms of your own historical context, but how I've written about it is, the maternal lineage in my family, they traced that back to right after the Civil War, when the men were dead and the women were having to take care of things.

So the stories in my family about the women were that they were running boarding houses, they were widowed, they had no money, they were making something out of nothing — they were having to keep things going. Now, that wasn't exactly the truth, because there were some men in there somewhere, but that was the feeling of the thing, that you just couldn't count on the men and you had to be really tough and strong, but not tough in the way Northern toughness is thought of. You know, just like a rock and hanging-on kind of toughness. And so that's what being a woman was to me. I mean, it was being like my mother, it really was. It was being like my mother, which also meant taking care of men who were not in very good shape.

ANDERSON: What was your parents' marriage like, from what you witnessed?

9:42

PRATT: Well, what I witnessed was a lot of misery. My father was an alcoholic. He was a binge drinker, and so a lot of the stuff that's typical in enabler-alcoholic relationships was there, and I saw certain stages of it, you know, when she tried to stop him from drinking by pouring it down the sink, when she tried to stop him from drinking — you know, when he was threatening to kill himself, she was saying, "Well, do you want me to kill myself, too?" Um, but these would come at distinct and separated moments, and in between, just nothing happened. No communication, no nothing. My father was a very lively, charming person outside the house, and inside the house, he was a very depressed and subdued person.

I found some — when I was about 12 or 13, I rummaged around in her dresser and found her diaries. And I saw that she'd been worried about his drinking before they married but she went ahead anyway. And then much later, I found some letters that he had written to her in which he called her Buddy, my Buddy. And I think — this is all hindsight, very, very long hindsight — but I look at them and I look at my father, and I think that he was probably attracted to her masculinity.

My father was so upset when his brother Francis married that he wouldn't come to the wedding. When he was older, my father's best friend was Miss Louise Rogan, who was a pants-wearing, men's-shirt-

wearing, chain-smoking, you know, woman. She married and she had a child, too, but, you know, it's not about sexuality, exactly. It's about gender expression. So, I think he was probably attracted to my mother, who's kind of tomboy, to her masculinity, and then I think they just could never negotiate that all, you know, negotiate what that was like for them. And who knows what he was doing when he was on the road all those years playing baseball — maybe he was having relationships with men.

ANDERSON: That was before he was married, that he was traveling?

12:40

PRATT: Yeah. From the time he was about 17 until he was in his early 30s, he was traveling. I don't know what he was doing, but he wasn't — who knows what he was doing. But what I saw as a child were two people who were deeply connected to each other and deeply troubled in that relationship. And it got focused on the drinking but, you know, the drinking is never — it's the sort of symptom, almost. I mean, my father was medicating himself from being a white Southern racist, you know.

ANDERSON: Were you close to him?

PRATT: I was close to him until I was about five or six. And then I wasn't any more, because it became clear I wasn't going to be a boy, and he didn't know what to do with me. I have these pictures of me when I was little, where it's clear he was just — and then, I remember, it wasn't just the pictures. I remember being close to him. I mean, I remember him taking me around in town, you know, and getting ice cream and sort of showing me off. I mean, it felt like it was that. It was a good feeling. And then, it became clear I couldn't be physically adventurous in a way that he needed me to be to connect with him, that was the end of it.

ANDERSON: So did it feel then in your household that you and your mom were sort of allies?

PRATT: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: And then Dad was on the outs?

PRATT: Absolutely. We were, you know, we were the allies. He [Pa] was on the outs. And he — I think he felt that very keenly. I think it really hurt him but, I was a child, so, you know, I was being rejected by my father and my mother was not exactly warmly embracing me. I mean, I can never remember my mother holding me in her lap, ever. Who did hold me was Laura Cates.

ANDERSON: Yeah, let's talk about her.

PRATT: Yeah, who was an African American woman who raised me from the time I was about 13 weeks old until I was about 13 years old.

ANDERSON: Did she live with your family?

15:00

PRATT: No. She actually lived, ironically enough, on the old Moran place down by the river which was the farm that my Grandfather Brown and Grandma Ora came to farm when they moved up from Choctaw County. They were trying to farm on the old Moran place and a flood came and took away all the livestock and ruined them and that was the end of that. Laura lived in a cabin, I think I might use that word, in the Quarters, which is what it was called, on the Moran place. And I'm pretty sure they were, if not the original slave cabins, they were built on the foundations, because it was the Quarters. And that's where she lived, and she walked to work every day and my mother drove her home. And as she got older, my mother went and got her. But when she started taking care of me, we were living on Depot Street, and so it was close. It was close to where she lived.

She was originally from Mississippi. I don't know very much about her life, but I know that as a young woman, she worked briefly at a shirt factory in the northern part of Mississippi, so I think that she may have come off one of the plantations and gotten work at this factory. And I have the name of the little town, actually, written down somewhere, but I don't remember it right now. I don't know how she got to Bibb County, except they're roughly parallel, in other words, if you took a road straight from that little town where she was working in the factory, straight across east, you'd come to our county. So somehow, she got there.

I don't know very much about her life at all. She died before I understood I needed to try to talk to her, and we never talked very much. I believe it's possible that she grew up and lived a good bit of her life on one of the relatively isolated plantations of Mississippi, because her language usage, her African American language usage, was very distinct, and a language in and of itself, which I think is not unusual for the languages that grow up around, in those isolated plantations. And I always had a lot of trouble understanding her.

I think I also had trouble understanding her because she didn't talk to me. Because if I were with her from the time of an infant until 13, I think I would have understood her if she had talked to me. But I believe that means she didn't talk to me. My mother could understand her quite well, but I couldn't, so I think it means she didn't talk to me. But she took really good care of me and, you know, she's the person I remember holding me.

ANDERSON: So your mother was working even when you were an infant, and that's why you had care –

18:48

PRATT: That's right. My mother was working. But it wasn't just that my mother was working. My mother didn't hold me. That's my mother's nature. Whatever that complication was around having a child, that was not her relationship to me. She's not going to hold me.

ANDERSON: Do you know why she didn't have more children?

PRATT: She had a hysterectomy after she had me. She had a fibroid tumor and she had a hysterectomy but not an ovariectomy, so — but she couldn't have more children. She said she wanted to have more children, but it's very hard for me to believe that she wanted to have more children. You know, she and my father were locked into their thing and I was just kind of there, really. I mean, they loved me, they did, but what does that mean?

ANDERSON: Did that feel like a loss to you, the lack of siblings? Do you remember how you felt about it as a child?

PRATT: Well, I would have the fantasies. I would read *The Five Little Peppers* and think about having a big family, right? Or I'd read, you know, *Little Women* or something. But I didn't really want siblings, and I had my cousin Anne, who's nine months older than me, and we spent the holidays together and parts of summers together and she was really like a sibling, without having to have them around all of the time. So, I really grew up in this very woman-centered space in my family.

ANDERSON: Do you remember when you realized in your family the difference between the races, that you had an awareness that you were white and the woman caring for you was black? Do you remember being aware of that?

PRATT: No, I don't. I certainly have talked to other people, both Southern and not Southern, who had a moment of awareness. I think that the racism that I grew up in was so deep that there was never a time where I just thought — in other words, to see somebody as African American and you as white, you have to have a certain level of self-consciousness about that, and I think that I grew up under segregation that was so deeply inculcated that there was no self-consciousness. None.

It was just like the river, you know, is there a difference between the river and land? Well, of course. But you don't say to yourself, Oh, the river, oh, the land, they're two different things. You know, it's just like, Well, yes, they're two different things, and that's just, you know, you don't —

So I really only became self-conscious around racialization of humanity with the rise of the civil rights movement and the fact that the racists and the white supremacism — I should really say white supremacists, because that's what they were — had to develop their justifications, and that was when self-consciousness entered into the

situation, you know. And that was really after Laura had retired. She was no longer taking care of me.

ANDERSON: Do you remember the conversations in your home around the civil rights movement, even the stuff in the 1950s?

22:56

PRATT: Yeah. Well, there were no conversations; [there was indoctrination.]

ANDERSON: Did you watch coverage?

PRATT: Yes. We watched coverage. What I remember is — this may not be an accurate memory and I may be conflating two things, but I believe I remember being taken by my father to a meeting in the courthouse that was called by the White Citizens' Council around the time of the rise of the civil rights movement. And I've gone back and looked at the newspapers, the press, the *Centreville Press* coverage, and I think that memory may be accurate. And the reason I think it might be accurate is just the feeling I have when I remember being there. I just think it was that kind of meeting. Somebody had come in, you know, it was right about when, out of Mississippi, they were organizing all these citizens' councils all over the South, and I just think I remember the meeting. And I don't know when that would have been, but I think [I was] maybe 11 or 12. What I remember is my father sitting in his rocking chair watching the coverage of the Freedom Riders being beaten up, and the buses burned, or — it would have been the earlier stuff, because by '64 I was in college. So, some of the earlier actions.

ANDERSON: School desegregation and stuff?

PRATT: Yeah, yeah, maybe Little Rock, I can't remember. But I just remember him just saying the most vile kinds of things and, you know, talking about killing people, they should be killed and — when I say saying vile things, now, I don't remember his exact language. All I remember, again, is, like, the feeling of it, you know, just hatred, hatred.

ANDERSON: And how did it register to you at the time?

PRATT: It was horrible, although my ideology at the time, absolutely, was that of a white supremacist. I mean, their ideology was my ideology. I remember I had a German pen pal, Horst Werner. I don't know how I got him. You know, it was during that time, you had these pen pals. How do you even get them? I had this German pen pal, and he asked me about what was happening, because of course it was all over the world. And I wrote him this letter back justifying white supremacy, and never heard from him again. [Actually, I did. Just found letters from him.] You can imagine, a child of the Nazi era, you know, getting this stuff from this girl in the U.S. saying essentially the same things. I mean, gosh, this poor kid. So, you know, their ideology was my ideology, but I

can also remember being frightened by my father's anger and irrationality.

And here's something I don't think I've ever written about, either, and it's important. I don't know exactly how old I was, but Martin Luther King was leading the struggles in Montgomery at the time, and the FBI — and see, I didn't know this but I know now — the FBI had started its disinformation campaign against him. So there was all this literature floating around out there defaming him in one way or another, right? I remember my father calling me into the living room. He was sitting in his rocking chair, and he had some of this literature. It's the only time my father ever talked about sex to me. And what he did is he told me that Dr. King had been molesting young girls, and this proved it, right? And I don't know what else he said, you know, whatever, this is why these people are terrible. This is, you know, whatever his line was. I just remember that part of it very distinctly, and I remember feeling that something was terribly, terribly, terribly wrong that my father would be talking to me like this about sexual matters — that something was really, really wrong, that he would be doing that, that it was across all appropriate boundaries, that it was just — wow, this is bad, bad, bad. I just got out of there.

So, a lot of the stuff around my father, I just wanted to stay away from my father. I just wanted to get away from him. And yet, I had a lot of compassion for him because he was clearly just a miserable, miserable, miserable person. But meanwhile he was making us miserable, too. I mean, that was sort of the feeling in the house.

So what I discovered, going back again, reading the *Centreville Press*, is how thoroughly enmeshed he must have been. For instance, the editor of the *Centreville Press* was also the mayor of the town, was also head of the White Citizens' Council.

ANDERSON: That's pretty typical.

PRATT: And I saw a list of, you know, the members, and my father was on the list, and they was always sponsoring various reactionary, horrible things, like there was the time that they sent an African American family — it was their response to the civil rights activists coming from outside the region, right? — they sent an African American family north to Detroit as part of saying, they were trying to say, You think things are so great in the North, we're going to send you up there and you're going to find out, you know, things are bad up there, too, and things are really good down here. We take care of you down here — that kind of thing. It was like a propaganda campaign, just horrible stuff. None of that was I conscious of. I was just conscious of what was going on inside the house and then this coverage.

30:00

But the civil rights movement had a profound effect on me, and I talk about this, I actually talk about this now sometimes, because I've been trying to explain to people how much this era that we're in right now reminds me of being inside segregation, just this kind of enclosed,

hermetically sealed feeling of information's not getting through, and people who are inside think everything's fine, and they don't understand if they were outside, how it would look, you know.

And the civil rights movement broke through to me, even though it took me some time to absorb it, but when I voted for the first time — which would have been May of 1968, I would have turned 21 the September before — I went home to vote in Centreville, and I got my ballot, and it was in the courthouse that was my grandpapa's courthouse, right? No voting booths, no privacy, nothing. And I got my ballot and my father was with me. I looked at the ballot and there was the rooster, which is the emblem of the white supremacists' Democratic Party. And also on the ballot there was the emblem of a black panther.

Now, much later, I understood that in Lowndes County, SNCC was organizing with African American farmers who had been organizers in the sharecroppers' movement of the '30s, and they had started the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which turned into the Lowndes County Freedom Party, and their emblem was the black panther. Of course, those SNCC people, later on, went on to found the Black Panthers, but its origins were in the black belt of Alabama.

I don't know — I just was talking to Anne Braden about this and we were trying to figure it out. I don't think this was the Lowndes County Freedom Party, because that was a county party. But there was an Alabama party that wasn't the same as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. There was some group that had organized and we think they were on the ballot for the state, not for the county, which makes sense, because it was the main primary, the Democratic primary.

Anyway, there was the black panther, and I had been seeing for years the demonstrations, and I had been away to the university, where nobody was saying that integration was good, nobody, nobody, nobody. I had one philosophy professor and he took us to see a demonstration, a demonstration against Lurleen Wallace [George Wallace's wife who was elected as a stand-in for him as governor] in the ROTC. It was probably an antiwar demonstration, maybe. That was it: we were observing. It was part of being in the philosophy class. Nobody, not a single voice of authority, was saying that segregation was wrong, but the movement, the movement was just there.

And so there was this ballot, and there was the black panther, and I picked up my pencil and I started to X by the black panther, and my father leaned over my shoulder and said, "You can't do that." And I said, "Oh, yes, I can." And I voted for the Black Panther Party. And took it and put it in the ballot box. I'm sure they went and took it out and tore it up, you know.

But I tell that story a lot now, to talk to people about the importance of mass movements, about how you can be isolated, you can be indoctrinated, you can not have access to any authority in your life who can help you, and a mass movement can break through to you. And it broke through to me. It broke through to me. And that was the end of my father. That was it. That was the end of —

ANDERSON: Your relationship, you mean?

35:00

PRATT: Well, that was the end of his ideology having any credence in my life, and I can't — my relationship, I can't even say that there was a relationship, exactly, you know. I mean, it's not like he stopped talking to me, because he hadn't really been talking to me anyway. I can remember a few conversations with him that were interesting, mostly around religion, because he believed that our religion and evolution were not contradictory, and he was very unusual in that. He was not a religious person.

ANDERSON: Oh, no?

PRATT: No, no, not at all. He was not a religious person. I mean, sometimes he went to church, but —

ANDERSON: So you weren't really raised —

PRATT: I was raised very religious in the Presbyterian church, but my father, oh, sometimes he went to church. He was a deacon, but he was an odd combination of free thinker and ideologue, racist ideologue.

ANDERSON: Let's stop there.

36:08

END DVD 2

DVD 3

ANDERSON: So, let's talk about high school.

PRATT: OK. This is a story I'd like to tell about high school, because it has to do with queerness, and certainly, there's been some wonderful documentation of queerness in the South over the last few years — James Sears and John Howard and all those folks. So, my story is not so unusual, but it is my story.

I was in the band, and the band was a place where [almost] all the gender-variant or gender-contradictory or gender-rebellious people went, because we didn't want to be the football players and we didn't want to be the cheerleaders or the majorettes. We didn't fit those roles, and so, where did you go? Because football as a social event was so dominating or, to a lesser extent, basketball, but really, football, and so you didn't have a place. In the band, you had a role, you know, you made music. And I was in the band. I became a percussionist and while I was in the band we had an almost all-girl percussion section. We didn't call it a drum line then. I wish we had. (laughter) I went home recently and somebody had in back of their car window, Bibb County Drum Line. I thought, Oh no, why didn't we get to have that cool designation when I was coming along?

But I had the experience of doing this nontraditional thing, which was drumming. And this is a very old thing with me. I can remember being a five-year-old, maybe younger, and going to the football games with my mother, and you were allowed to run around. I was so small. I was so small I could run around under the bleachers, and I can remember standing by the gate as the band marched off, and being completely mesmerized by the drums.

So, I became a drummer and I had a particularly close relationship with someone else in the drum line whose name was Lila Williams. And we, besides just being in the band, we did duets together. We developed these pieces drumming together and took them to state competitions and were very, very good. We won, you know, first place, all the time. Of course, not that many people were doing drum duets, either, right? But we were. It was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life to drum with her. It was just thrilling, thrilling, thrilling. And we were very good.

And sometimes we would do other sort of strange things with each other, like, we'd take our bikes and we went to this abandoned house that was next to my house. It was actually the first house my parents had lived in when I was a baby, and it had fallen into decay, and we went in and had a picnic there. And, you know, it was the kind of thing that isn't, I suppose, so unusual for kids to do, but it was unusual for two young girls to do, to roam, to go into an abandoned house together, you know, the walls were all marked up with stuff, and we did some other things like that, just adventurous things. We had this relationship that was a queer relationship but we had no language for that.

4:40

And I had a boyfriend, Benny, Benny Lee Nash, who I never kissed or anything, right? I would hang out on his porch with him and his sister. I really liked him but I never did anything with him. And I didn't really date in high school. I sort of had crushes, but my crushes were always on kind of feminine guys, or tough girls. I mean, I can't even say I was crushed out on Lila. I didn't have sexual feelings about her. She was just a force in my life.

Well, when we were 15, I guess, it would've been the spring of sophomore year, she came to me and said that she had been french-kissing Frank Cleveland. Now, Frank Cleveland, I'd known him since I was a baby, so it's like, the very idea of kissing Frank Cleveland was disgusting right there, but it was more than that. It was — I immediately thought, This is it, it's over, she's going over to this other place. And I felt very betrayed.

Now, looking back, of course, I understand it wasn't that simple. She was trying to figure something out herself. And what happened with Lila is that she had a nervous breakdown and ran away from home. She's from a very poor family. Her father was actually the bootlegger that my father bought from. He was imprisoned for some part of her life. She had a very, very tough life. Very smart, very tough life. Ran away. It was during this period of the civil rights struggle, so a young white girl goes missing, what do they do? They call out the National Guard to find her. So there's this huge to-do about her being missing. They find her in the Presbyterian church in Brent and her family sends her away to, has her committed to Bryce's, the mental institution in Tuscaloosa.

Many years later, I went back and I looked at my journal, because I've kept a journal since I was 13. And so I went and I looked at my journal to see what I said. And what I said were these admonitions to myself. This thing has happened with Lila, right? And then I say to myself, I should start being nicer to the boys. I should start wearing more lipstick, or I should start wearing lipstick. So, I was just saying to myself, This could be you. Watch out. Watch out. You'd better get yourself in line, here.

And I don't want to oversimplify this. I don't want to say, Oh, I was a lesbian, you know. I was not somebody who was having sexual feelings, but I knew where the powerful attraction of adventure was. That's what it was for me, adventure, a way out. And what happened? She was locked up in a mental institution for a year. And as she said to me, years later — we found each other, and there's a long story around that — but she said, "If my family had had money, I would've gone to college a year early." Which is true, but they didn't, so she went to a mental institution, where she knew people who were in the Zelda Scott Fitzgerald circle and formed a band there at Bryce's and played with them, I mean, had this whole other thing going on in Bryce's.

Anyway, that closed me down for quite a long time. And I got married, went to college in Alabama, at Tuscaloosa, and the closest to bohemia that I could find were the poets.

9:15

ANDERSON: Was it a given that you were going to go to college?

PRATT: Absolutely, without a doubt.

ANDERSON: And your mother had –

PRATT: My mother had a B.A. My mother had graduated from high school when she was 16. She worked for four years. She lived at home and she worked for four years in town, keeping books, doing stuff, and earned enough money to send herself to school. And she worked while she was in school. And that was true, uh, for all but the youngest child. The oldest sister, Aunt Lethean, sent herself back to college after she was already working. But all of the women got college degrees, and the one boy, all of them.

ANDERSON: Unusual.

PRATT: Unusual, yes.

ANDERSON: So it was a given that you would –

PRATT: It was a given, it was a given. And I was very smart. I was smart, smart, smart. So it was like, what was I going to do? They're going to send me to college. You know, but it was a given that I was going to go. So I went to college. In my junior year, I married a poet, who's — and our best friend, John Finlay, was a gay man, although nobody said he was a gay man, you know. Nobody talked about any of this stuff then.

ANDERSON: You guys met because you were working at the *Press* together, the newspaper or something, is that right?

PRATT: No. We met because my English teacher sent me to the literary magazine.

ANDERSON: Literary magazine.

PRATT: Right, to the literary magazine Comment. So that was the bohemian circle. The few of us that there were hung out at the Chukker in Tuscaloosa. It is now gone, I hear it's gone, but it was that space that's so common in Southern towns, where there's a bar that's not just a gay bar. It's where the strange people come, all the people who don't fit, and that was the Chukker. The artists went there, the poets went there, the queer people went there, and we all hung out at the Chukker.

So I married Marvin. He was a poet — very entranced by him. Couldn't imagine not — I was a virgin, never had sex. Like, this was it? How was I going to have sex? Plus, and I've written about this, I was locked in, literally. I was living in dorms and sorority houses where they locked the doors on the women between, you know, 11 and 7 in the

18:48

morning, and you couldn't go out. And, you know, that part of me that was buried when Lila was locked up, I was looking for the way out. So, the poets — [if] I had to get married to do it, well, that's what you did. That's what you did in my generation.

ANDERSON: What was living in the sorority house like?

PRATT: Well, I was pledged, along with several other people in my pledge class, because my sorority [Chi Omega] was on academic probation, so they pledged a whole bunch of us because we were really smart, because they had to get off academic probation. So we were always not quite — we were always a little off, you know. I mean, there was Julie England, who was Miss Cotton, right, who was just exquisitely beautiful and vacuous, from Memphis. And all these other people who were, like, good-ol'-girl daughters of the bankers and whatever. And then there were the sort of oddniks, who were smart —

ANDERSON: So you didn't really fit in but you had other people who didn't fit in with you, so that's OK?

PRATT: Yeah, I was friends with then, you know, Sally Angirona Davis and Gladys Worsham, but mostly, I didn't — I pledged because one of my mother's best friends had been a Chi Omega and she just wanted me to pledge. And so, I don't know, I did. And maybe one of my aunts had been — I can't remember. Anyway, I just did. I just did.

ANDERSON: You were still being a good girl.

PRATT: I was being a good girl. But then I married and shocked everybody, I think. I mean, oddly enough, it was an act of rebellion.

ANDERSON: How so?

PRATT: Well, everybody else, you graduate and then you marry in June after you graduate, and you have sex anyway. I didn't know that. (laughs) You know, I didn't know that, right? But I just thought, Well, OK, and — I got out. I got out and I —

ANDERSON: So that meant you two had your own apartment. You were no longer living on —

PRATT: I had my own apartment and I pretty much didn't see anybody from school after that. That was it. I had my own apartment. And I got pregnant very quickly, and that was a terrible thing. I had applied for a Fulbright and I figured out I was pregnant in — I finished school a semester early, so the last semester, the last semester of my senior year — I married in the middle of my junior year, in, like, December of my junior year, right, so not quite a year later, like in November, I figured

out — I mean, I was pregnant. Oh god. And either right before I found this out, or right after, I guess maybe right after, I found out I had gotten a Fulbright. And I couldn't take it because I was going to deliver the baby, like, a month before I would have gone to England and I would have had to have gone alone, because it was during the Vietnam War and my husband couldn't leave the country because of the draft. So I couldn't take it and —

ANDERSON: And that felt like a heartbreak to you?

15:55

PRATT: That was very, very tough. That was really, really hard. And I learned much later that poor Marvin, I mean, you know, he felt he — it's a very complicated history with him and the women in his family and pregnancies, that is his to tell, but, you know, I learned much later that he was just eaten up with guilt about it. And of course he didn't tell me that then. It might have helped.

ANDERSON: So your marriage was really strained by becoming pregnant so soon?

PRATT: I don't — I wouldn't use those words. You know, the degree of consciousness with which we now talk about relationships and the dynamics of relationships, is so the fruit of women's liberation, even in the mainstream. Even in the mainstream.

ANDERSON: Oh, it's true. I agree.

PRATT: People who have no idea this is the result of all this stuff that we did. But before that, I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what I was feeling. I didn't know what I was thinking. I didn't have language. He didn't have language. We were just doing it. What did we know? I just knew I was upset. It was horrible that I was pregnant. I didn't want to be pregnant. Of course, nobody said abortion. Oh my god. You know, I don't even know if I knew what an abortion was. But certainly, at that time, I would've had to have three doctors to write letters to say I would die if I'd had this pregnancy, you know. It was just — and at that point, my training from my mother of, like, things just happen to you. You've just got to go ahead and do the best you can, because you can't control things — you know, that just kicked in. So I went ahead, went to graduate school. I went to graduate school.

ANDERSON: It's amazing that you gave birth and went to graduate school within a couple of months.

PRATT: A month. A month later. Ransom was born August 3rd and I was in graduate school —

ANDERSON: How did you manage?

PRATT: I don't know.

ANDERSON: I mean, really, how did you manage? Did you co-parent?

PRATT: We co-parented.

ANDERSON: OK, so Marvin –

PRATT: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: – was a useful, active parent.

PRATT: He was. It absolutely was half and half.

ANDERSON: And that's unusual.

18:37

PRATT: Very unusual. He wasn't — there were a lot of unusual things about him. Some of them I really — I feel like I don't want to say on tape because they are private to him. I mean, he told me much, much later — actually, when I was in the process of getting ready to leave him, he told me some of these secrets that made things a lot more intelligible to me, about his life.

But I will say this, and this I feel comfortable with saying. I think that he had profound gender ambivalence, profound gender ambivalence that went all the way back to his teenage years, and that he carried — and for all I know, he still carries with him, I don't know — but I think that his feelings about being a man are very complicated and that his feelings about femaleness or femininity, you know, there are things about that that are very close to him. And I think that meant he was able to parent. That he wanted to parent. That he needed to parent.

It also made, when I came out as a lesbian, it very difficult because he wanted the children. He needed them more than I did, in a way — for him to be who he needed to be, he needed the children.

ANDERSON: Would you also say — is this gender ambivalence part of what was so attractive?

PRATT: Absolutely. And of course, now, I go back, right, and I do talk about this sometimes when I talk about things. And I think I write about it in the introduction to *S/He*, that just like gay people, gay men and lesbians, do a little life review when they come out — Oh, that's why I had the crush on the gym teacher, Oh, that's why I held hands with my best friend — I've done the same thing around gender transgression, and I've gone back and I've looked and I've seen, Oh, my first girlfriend when I was five was Cathy Ward, who came out later as a lesbian, but a butch lesbian. It's no accident. Benny Nash, who I mentioned, no wonder we were — I was his girlfriend. We were girlfriends together. He came out as a gay man and when I reunited with him many years later, he was

completely feminine. Completely feminine. Just the sweetest little queer queen you would ever want to have anything to do with. I love him so much still. From a coalmining family in Alabama, you know, in Bibb County, coalminer's family. Just the most generous hearted person you would ever want to meet in your life. No wonder I wanted to be his girlfriend. We were girlfriends together. So I've been drawn to gender ambivalence, you know, forever, without having — just like, no name for being lesbian, no name for being queer, no name for all of this. I just did it.

And Marvin — yes. Beautiful feminine man. All the gay men were crushed out on him. All of them were in love with Marvin. So was I. So — but we didn't know what we were doing. I see it as one of the — I see our marriage and the failure of our marriage as really one of the tragedies of gender and sexual oppression. If there had been, you know, if we were in another era, if we had this information we have now, I don't know what would've happened, I really don't.

ANDERSON: That's a hard thing to reckon with, too.

PRATT: Yeah, yeah. So —

ANDERSON: So, what was your marriage like in the beginning, when it was young and fresh?

22:27

PRATT: We were — I don't know.

ANDERSON: Was he a graduate student, too?

PRATT: No, he finished his M.A. in English as I was finishing my undergraduate degree. So I went to graduate school and he started teaching at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. We lived in between. We lived in Hillsborough. First, we lived at Chapel Hill for just a few months, for a semester, and that was — the commute was too bad for him. Then we moved to Hillsborough, North Carolina, and we lived there. He commuted to Greensboro, I commuted to Chapel Hill, and we alternated: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I took care of [Ransom]; Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, he took care of [Ransom]. And I got my classes on the days that I could and we just set it up that way. And that's how it was through the first child. And then I got pregnant.

This was when — you know, the first time I got pregnant, the condom failed. The second time I got pregnant, I was trying not to use the birth control pill, because all this stuff was coming out about how the pill was dangerous. My cousin Mary said, "You don't want to use that pill if you can help it." Well, you know, the combination of foam and rhythm method didn't help it. I think about that a lot when people talk about irresponsible pregnancies. I think, You have no idea how many times people's birth control fails. I had two children from the failure of birth control, and within — they were 18 months apart. So, I

was just incredibly fertile. I probably could have had 13 children, like my grandmother, easily. Just popped them right out.

Well, that was a complication. I mean, when I think about my marriage, I think, how much — I mean, so many things, so many factors. Marvin was a sexist. He was a sexist. He was. I mean, very few men weren't at that time. I didn't want to get pregnant. Having sex meant getting pregnant. It made having sex very difficult and problematic for me. Um, I was trying to have a self, you know? We were partnering pretty OK. He had a very volatile temper. He was a yeller. Wasn't good. I didn't know how to stand up for myself, really — the legacy of my mother.

ANDERSON: Was he also an alcoholic?

25:00

PRATT: I don't know. I know that I was drinking a lot. It took me a long time to identify that as alcoholic behavior. But I — you know, I remember my first drink, I remember my last drink. That's pretty typical of an alcoholic. (laughs) You know, I know when I started. I know when I stopped. I identify myself as a double winner. Alcoholic, child of an alcoholic family, in 12-step programs — you know, the two are very intertwined for me, very intertwined. But I was drinking a lot. I drank a lot with him. I drank a lot in the marriage and so, I think that says something about how stressful everything was.

ANDERSON: When you say he was really sexist, coupled with the fact that he really co-parented with you, so how else did those two things then play out in your gender arrangements? Did that mean you did all the cooking and cleaning? Did that mean he had a problem with you going on to graduate school and then employment?

PRATT: No.

ANDERSON: Was he controlling of your behavior?

PRATT: Right. So interesting. I mean, when we think about my mother and father, and me and Marvin, it's like, from the outside you can say there's all this gender-stereotyping pressure and gender conformity, but then what really happens is another matter. He had no — no, he was fine with my being in school. He was fine with my getting my degree. Our plan was, I would teach and he would be the poet. That was the plan. I was going to be the stable breadwinner and he was going to be the poet. And actually, it was messing his plan up to have these children and to — and also, as, you know, as we got more into the reality of things, it wasn't going to be that easy for me to get a job. It wasn't going to be that easy, you know? So he was having to be a breadwinner when he didn't want to be. He didn't really want to be the main breadwinner.

But then, there was this, I say sexism — I mean, I have a letter from him somewhere when we were engaged and I took a summer job for a while, we were apart for a few months, and I got this letter from him in which he wrote to me and he said, “I miss you so much and I just want to see you and rape you.”

ANDERSON:

But that was very typical language at the time. Very.

27:40

PRATT:

Exactly, exactly. And that’s what I mean by this sort of layer of sexism that then didn’t get played out straightforwardly in our arrangements. I cooked. We shared cleaning. We had brutal fights over our cleaning standards, because mine were not as particular as his. We had a blue shag rug. I’ll never forget this rug. It was very difficult to clean, and I would never clean it, never vacuum it, to his standards, you know. So there’s all this stuff that was contradictory about, you know, he wanted the house clean in a certain kind of way.

I remember my neighbor saying, “I can always tell the days Marvin is home with the children and the days you are home with the children, because the days you are home with the children, they are dressed in their play clothes and, you know, sort of sloppily. The days that Marvin is home, they’re all tidied up and neat, in nicer clothes.” So, you know, all this contradiction, all this contradiction.

But then he was very frightened, I think, of many things, inarticulately so and controlling also, you know, very controlling. And we’d have rages around that. And again, another neighbor, young women neighbors who were free spirited, saying to me after I left, We just couldn’t believe you let Marvin treat you like that. So, my sense of how I was being treated and the external world’s sense of how I was being treated were very different. I didn’t think he was treating me like that. I felt like I was fighting with him and standing up to him and negotiating, you know, lots of negotiation.

As I got tuned into women’s liberation, which I did around 19 — I went there in ’68, and probably around ’71, I began to fall in with the women at Chapel Hill who had come from — you know, Sara Evans had come from wherever she’d come from, Chicago, New Haven, and things were percolating and some of those women were in the English department. They were living collectively in collective houses, one in Carrboro, a famous collective house in Carrboro where — there were Nancy Blood and Leslie Kahn and Elizabeth Knowlton and a couple of other people were living. One woman who was in medical school was living there. But before that, there was a house in Chapel Hill and that’s where I went for the parties, where I danced with Sara, and there was Elizabeth and somebody else living in that house.

And so, once I got to know those women, I began to try to negotiate more, in an even more egalitarian way, with Marvin. You know, like, I should — you should be — maybe that’s when we started sharing the cleaning and fighting about the rug. Um, but then, he was like, Well, if we’re going to share the cleaning, you should share the care of the car

and the mowing the lawn. And I was forced to admit this was true, you know. And so I did. But it was difficult, you know. We would fight about it all.

But, you know, his parents would come to visit and they would just be scornful. They'd say to him, Who's wearing the pants? His father — Who's wearing the pants in this family? His father — ah, his father was an air force colonel. So, you know, those were the — I was married to him, by the end, about 11 years. So —

ANDERSON: Are they sort of — in my imagination, there are parallel trajectories, the dissolution and the unraveling of the marriage and your getting to know feminism, getting active with women's liberation. [Do they] meet, those parallel tracks, or is it something else?

31:52

PRATT: No, no, no. I think that that's accurate. I think that just as the black [liberation] movement showed me a way out, women's liberation was showing me a way out. You know, human relationships can be different. Look at these women living collectively. I can remember, you know, going off by myself and having dinner with these female friends, and that was fraught, to say to my husband, "I'm going to go have dinner by myself with these female friends" — that was a big deal, a big deal, and you know, with reason. I mean, I ended up leaving. There are a lot of us who did. You know, we figured out there was another way to live.

So, that period of time which was — my introduction to women's liberation was, we had a lot of women in my class, in that graduate class in the English department, because the men were away at the Vietnam War, so they had given a bunch of us scholarships to keep their numbers up, because they had to have people to teach, right? So we had this female — I think we were at least half and we might have been more — female enrollment.

And women's liberation was happening, so, within the department, women began to agitate for, you know, getting hired in proportionate numbers, into the instructorships and other things. I can't remember. I can remember going in with someone and sitting down with the English department head, whose name I've forgotten now. He was a poet and he wrote this long poem about money, forgetting his name now [William Harmon?], anyway, we sat there to negotiate with him, and I can remember him just shaking. He was just trembling. It was so educational. It was like, Oh my god, he's frightened of us being here. Just us, the two of us.

So women were organizing within the university, within their departments. And then there was the stuff that was happening in town. You know, the cells, the different people, different groups that were turning into, like, Lollipop Power, and these different — and they would have CR groups and then they would turn into projects, right?

And I was never in any of those early projects, but I did work on the newsletter, which was just called the *Newsletter*, and it was a mimeographed newsletter that was mimeographed at the university and

mailed out through the university, because somebody had mailing privileges and they just did it and nobody knew that this was happening. And there was a rotating production crew and you got in the schedule and you helped type, run it off and staple it. And I started working on that and I wrote, maybe the first thing I ever wrote for publication after college was a review of Carolyn Heilbrun's *Beyond Androgyny* for this little newsletter.

And it was a newsletter for the feminist community of Chapel Hill-Durham. It had grown out of a two-cent mimeographed Chapel Hill-Durham women's liberation newsletter that was at lit tables. And before I actually met these people, I saw the lit tables but I was frightened of them. There was a lit table in front of the library, the undergraduate library at the University at North Carolina, and I would cross the little square there not to come near it because it frightened me so much. Because I knew if I read it, you know —

ANDERSON: Was the university all white?

PRATT: It was all white until — well, I don't want to say it was all white, but it was 1972 or 3 before there was an African American person in the English graduate school as a student.

ANDERSON: What was your perception even if there may have been African American students as undergrads or graduate students? Was your perception though that it stayed all white?

PRATT: I don't remember. I don't remember any, and, I mean, maybe in other departments but — and English was conservative. I don't remember any. You know, when I was at Alabama, I remember the first African American woman who went through rush.

ANDERSON: You've written about that.

PRATT: Yeah, I've written about that. And then, I can remember being in summer school and being in a class with one African American student, and then in [graduate school,] I don't think I was in class with anybody. There was just somebody who'd been admitted, I think. So, it was very, very, very, very white, and I hadn't started dealing with that. I hadn't really started dealing with that. Nor had — well, no, I don't want to say that. I just, um, the circles that I began to move in, some of the women were conscious around dealing with racist issues, around racism. Some more conscious than others, although I'd have to say, maybe, mostly that happened a little bit later, in the early '80s, maybe, late '70s, early '80s. I don't remember the *Newsletter* — well, I'm not sure what was in there. I was not so conscious at that point, of those issues.

So, I got involved and as, you know, I joined a CR group, but by the time I was in a CR group — well, I joined a CR group. I started a CR group with some people.

ANDERSON: We're just going to pause right there.

38:58

END DVD 3

DVD 4

ANDERSON: So, how do you want to organize talking about your introduction to the women's movement in the '70s? Do you want to talk about the *Newsletter* and then *Feminary*, or some of the ideas?

PRATT: I think some of the (both voices), because they flow into — it's very hard to separate the ideas from the people. It really, really is. My *Sisterhood is Powerful*, for instance, which is the first book of feminist theory that I ever had, was given to me by Elizabeth Knowlton, who was in the English department with me, who was a graduate student with me, and who's part of that organizing to get us hired as instructors, and proportionally. And she was also part of this circle of people who were doing the newsletter. So, there was not much of a gap between what was going on — there's a lot of overlap.

I think the way to describe that period most succinctly is to go back to that feeling I described earlier, that I had with Lila, which was this feeling of great adventure and of not knowing what was going to happen. And that was the experience I was having by going to these all-women's parties, that weren't all lesbian at that point, by any means. The women who were in this circle were organizing film festivals, they were bringing in speakers, they were reading literature, they were talking about these different ideas. And it just was thrilling, like what I had had with Lila — it was thrilling, this energy, feeling of powerfulness and potentiality. And that was not available to me in my marriage, anywhere, at all. Although I was very attached and loved the person I was married to, but I couldn't go there. I kept trying to, but I couldn't go there with him.

So, I — I brushed up against this possibility, although I was not — I don't want to overstate how much I was involved, at all. Some conversations, some lectures, some reading, working on the *Newsletter* a bit, going to some parties. This was mostly in '72 and '73, '74, and then, I couldn't finish my dissertation. I couldn't finish it. I couldn't get a job. I was doing a job — I was trying — I was interviewing for jobs and they were saying things like, Who's going to take care of your children? and, You have such a nice voice, that would be quite a nice thing to have around our office. That was what was happening. I couldn't get work. I mean, there was the sexism and there was the fact that I hadn't finished my dissertation. And I hadn't finished because I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know who — who am I? What am I doing?

So, my teaching assistantship ran out. Marvin was getting squeezed out of his job because they weren't going to hire M.A.s anymore, they were only going to hire Ph.D.s, and we didn't have support for our household. So he took a job as head of the arts council in Fayetteville. It was right when the arts councils were all getting funded. It was the new thing. He got a job being head of the arts council in Fayetteville and we moved to Fayetteville, which was like going back to Alabama. I mean, it

was brutal. Country clubs, still no black people, no Jews were allowed in the country club. Fort Bragg. All these Vietnam vets killing women on the streets, shooting them down like dogs. It was brutal, brutal, brutal. And there I was with this newly awakened consciousness.

So, I had started a CR group with someone I had been in college with, actually an ex-sorority sister, my friend Beth, who happened to be living in the area at the time, and another friend from Hillsborough and one other person. And I think that's right. I feel like Beth was in this group. Anyway, we had been meeting in the summer and then we moved, and I kept going. I would drive back up to work on my dissertation and to be part of this CR group. And that was a big part of my becoming another person, becoming more myself, because we did, as people do in CR, talk about taboo things. That was the first time I can ever remember saying the word masturbation, for instance, was in that group. We mostly talked about our relationships with our husbands.

But the result of all this was — the CR group came to an end — but the result of all of this was that I got involved with organizing in Fayetteville. I went to a NOW meeting. I can still remember how scared I was to drive there by myself, because I wasn't — it was a place I'd never been to, so it was scary. And that was back when — and people who didn't go through this, I think don't have a clear sense of this. That was back when the NOW chapters were really more wild and woolly than NOW proper, because it was just groups of women who needed some kind of affiliation to do stuff. But we were, you know, we were doing all kinds of local organizing.

ANDERSON: And how did it turn out when you went in?

7:02

PRATT: To this group?

ANDERSON: Yeah. Was it scary?

PRATT: Well, it was scary. There were just — there weren't many people there. They were all white women, maybe there were four or five, and it was strange. It was very strange to be there. But then it quit being strange really fast.

ANDERSON: Because didn't you go on to be the chapter president? I mean, you stayed connected to NOW.

PRATT: Oh, oh, no, oh (both voices) absolutely. I guess I was president and I edited the newsletter and I did all — I wrote grants and we put on these big, big, big community forums. I mean, they were the first ones, you know. We had one on battered women. We had one on women in the arts. We had one on women and religion. We had something on women in the military. We had a big one on women and rape, you know, where we had self-defense, and, I mean, hundreds of people came to these things. They were the first. We had the first march. We marched down

Hay Street in Fayetteville for, probably International Women's Day, I can't remember, or maybe it was Women's Equality Day, but anyway, we did all this stuff. You know, we'd set up hot lines and everything.

And at first, you know, I was a little ambivalent about it. I would do stuff and then I wouldn't do stuff. But then, I don't know, I served on the Cumberland County Commission on Women and all this stuff, all these activities. But what I think out of that period, I guess, what I would most like to comment on is — and I think this was not untypical for the people who were outside the bit intellectual centers, who were not in New York, who were not in Boston or Chicago, right, which means most of us — we didn't know. We knew almost nothing of movement history, almost nothing of what had gone before. We didn't have any of the political lessons to draw on, you know, of what we know now about the abolitionist movement and the women's suffrage and the kinds of struggles that went on there, and —

ANDERSON: You probably didn't even know much about the civil rights movement happening under your nose.

PRATT: No, no, no, no. I knew almost nothing. And so we were making this movement, but with hardly any tools, really, hardly any tools. And we made mistakes. We made mistakes. On the other hand, we did some things well that I think people in other places didn't do well, because, for instance, there were just a handful of us in Fayetteville, of white women who were interested in this. Now, how are we going to make anything happen? We had to look around to who else was politically active. What did that mean? That meant people in the black community. And so, there were African American women who were willing to do stuff with us — not join, but to do stuff with us.

ANDERSON: Like what?

PRATT: Well, they would co-organize. They would co-endorse. Like when we did the session on women and rape, for instance, there were political heavies, women, in the African American community, who would lend their endorsement to it. And we tried to, you know, in the planning, we would try to — we really did pretty well, about representation in speakers and so forth. We really did pretty well. I mean, I'm sure we were insufferable in many ways, in terms of unexamined stuff around racism, but the pragmatics of the situation in the South was that you couldn't get anything done and not organize with the black community, if you're organizing on something that was to the left like this. You just couldn't get it done.

I mean, it would be — and we wanted — we had enough of a consciousness that we really did believe it was about all women. You know, we really did. So for instance, when we did this forum on battered women, I was teaching. By that time, I was teaching at Fayetteville State University, which was the first teaching school for

African Americans in the state of North Carolina. It has a very distinguished, long history. I was teaching there. I was sharing an office with a wonderful African American man who was in the theater department. So I wrote a play and he staged it with his students, dramatizing domestic violence.

So there's many ways in which we did very well. We backed Calettha Powell, who was an African American woman who was trying to win a seat on the city council, and she had a suit going against the county or the city, and we backed her. But we had internal struggles about it, and I remember that I came up right on these things, and I was struggling with some of the white women who weren't coming up so right. So somehow I was ingesting or assimilating the way to do any racist work without, again, you know — I mean, around about this time when I started teaching at Fayetteville State, I began to try to educate myself more about African American history, so I was making some growth around this.

But I'm proud of those years, you know. We made mistakes, but we were organizing in Fayetteville, in the South, in 1976 and '77 and '78. I remember going to door to door in Fayetteville campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment, knocking on doors, door to door.

ANDERSON: And what kind of reception would you get?

13:48

PRATT: People would take the fliers and then they just wouldn't talk to me, mostly. Every once in a while, somebody would talk to me, but mostly they wouldn't. And that was right at the beginning of the — you know, Jesse Helms was from Hope Mills, which adjoins Fayetteville. It's in Cumberland County. That was his home county. He was our senator. And the very beginning of the right-wing technique of using the Christian churches to mob legislatures: that was sort of created in Cumberland County. The Berean Baptist Church, they bused them all up to Raleigh around the Equal Rights Amendment. They had this big, big — Phyllis Schlafly came and spoke at the Cumberland County auditorium — big rally, you know, whipping things up. I debated the local Eagle Forum people at the county library.

ANDERSON: Oh, boy.

PRATT: We were — I mean, it was —

ANDERSON: Hard work.

PRATT: It was the heart of the heart of women's liberation outside the metropolitan areas. We were doing it. And we did well. We did very well. You know, we made the newspapers. We raised the issues. And the work is still going on. I mean, the NOW chapter's still there. The [recent] murders of the women by the special ops people who came back from Afghanistan, they were testifying at the hearings, and you

know, I'm still in contact with them. I go down every so often. I do meetings there and I see them. And I've moved on, you know. It's a measure of how different I am now from what I was then. Now, the person who was president of the League of Women Voters, Roberta Waddle, who wouldn't join NOW when I was there, she's now president of NOW. And I'm in Workers World Party, so there's this long trajectory of growth, right?

But they were very important years, and one of the things that happened was that I fell in love with another woman and I came out as a lesbian. So in the middle of all this organizing, that was also happening. My husband actually introduced me to her. She was the daughter of a bookstore owner in Fayetteville, and he said to me, "I met this woman you're just gonna love." And he introduced me to her. She had been a Russian scholar and had dropped out of her Ph.D. program for complicated reasons, and was running the [local] bookstore for her parents. Fell in love with her. And that was the really the end of my marriage.

17:00

I mean, it took a while to unravel, but that was the end. And it was part of — and it was, you know, when the right wingers say, Oh, we can't let these lesbians and these feminists, these women's libbers, you know, we can't let them have access to our children, we can't let these ideas get out — well, of course, they're right, they're correct. Once we know that there are other ways to live, sometimes you will choose to live these other ways. I mean, I could have repressed myself. I could have chosen differently. It would've been spiritual suicide. I said to myself at the time, "If I don't do this, if I don't act on this emotion and this erotic feeling, I will be committing spiritual suicide." But I could've chosen that. I knew I was going to lose my children. I knew it was going to happen. I mean, on some level, I knew.

ANDERSON: You knew you were taking a big risk.

PRATT: I knew it was a big risk. I knew it was a big risk, but I made that decision. It was a conscious decision. I didn't know what it would cost me, but it was a conscious decision. And it came because of years and years and years, starting with the black civil rights movement, of seeing that you can break through these social constrictions, these oppressions. It can be done. It can happen. And —

ANDERSON: How aware had you been of lesbianism or couples, lesbian relationships, before you fell in love with this particular woman?

PRATT: I can remember the first time I heard the word lesbian. My aunt Laura Belle and her daughter Mary and her daughter Mary's college roommate Sarah and I were standing under the pecan tree at their house, the pecan tree that was planted the year my mother was born, and Mary said to Laura Belle — Mary must have been about 18, she'd just gone off to Auburn University — Mary said to Laura Belle, "Everyone thinks we're

19:08

lesbians because we spend so much time together” — meaning her and Sarah. And I don’t remember what else was said. I remember thinking, Oh. I didn’t compute it exactly, it’s just like, Oh, lesbians, women spending a lot of time together. And of course, Mary was saying, “No we’re not, really. We just enjoy each other. We spend a lot of time in our room.” Mary’s also a very masculine woman. This is — she’s been married now for 30 years, children, you know. I don’t think she was lesbian-identified ever, or a lesbian. But, you know, people’s stereotypes.

Then, Elizabeth Knowlton was the first person who came out to me as a lesbian. She gave me this *Sisterhood is Powerful* and then she talked to me. She said, “I just want to tell you this.” She told me because I had made a homophobic joke in one of my classes and then, after I made it, I realized what I had done, and I had told her that I had regretted it, that it was a mistake. And then she came out to me.

And then, at one of these parties where I danced with Sara Evans, I saw two women making out under a coffee table, and I was very repulsed and attracted by that. And then, I saw these collective households and there were women in them who were in relationships with each other. Not a lot of physical stuff, really, hardly any. The two women making out were — that was probably pretty much it. But I saw there was a way to live. There was a way — it wasn’t like you were going to drop off the edge of the earth. It was a way to live. Social circles, intellectual life, political life.

ANDERSON: And when you started that first affair, you realized that you were making a choice into that? Because you could’ve, like you say, continued to be married, had some sort of illicit sexual liaison with women and maintained a married life, but you saw it as something different.

PRATT: Well, what I tried at first, for about six months or so, was, I didn’t — I tried — my husband — Marvin and I tried to work something out, so we had like an open relationship for about six months. He had an affair with somebody else, I had this relationship going. It was an interesting attempt, a truly interesting attempt. And I know Robin Morgan has written about something like this, too, you know. And I’m sure other people were doing it, you know. I thought perhaps it was possible, and maybe in a different place and time with a different person, it would’ve been possible, you know. But it wasn’t.

I’d fallen in love with her. My husband was totally betrayed by that, and correctly, I think. Well, I think he thought, This is it. She’s going over to the other side, the other world, you know. And he wasn’t going to lose the children. He was not going to lose his children. He wasn’t. So then things disintegrated. And I really don’t, you know, want to talk about that in any detail. I’ve written about it, you know. But it did mark a time in my life where I wasn’t able to use the children as a focus, because pretty quickly they were out of my care. I wasn’t allowed to see

them for a period of time. And then, after we settled the legal details, he moved them to another state, to Kentucky. So, there I was.

ANDERSON: And that was allowed under your custody arrangement?

24:05

PRATT: Yes, yes. My custody — you know, it's interesting. For a number of years, I said to people, "Oh, I had father's visiting rights." And then, I actually looked at my divorce settlement. And of course, that wasn't true. It was much, much, much worse than anything any heterosexual father would ever have. I was not allowed to have them in my home if I lived with anyone else — anyone. Not a lover, but just a shared household. I was not allowed to take them out of their home state, wherever they were living, unless in the presence of my mother or one of my aunts. I got alternate Thanksgivings and a week in the summer. That was it. That was it.

So it was pretty hard. I would do these long trips. I'd drive from North Carolina to Kentucky straight, 14 hours, get them, and drive to Alabama so I could be with them out of their father's home. Or I would go and I'd pick them up and I'd take them to a state park and we'd stay in a motel room together so I could have some separate time. Then, I just couldn't do that. And so Marvin would leave the house and I would be in their house with them for a while, for, like, I went for Thanksgiving or something. A lot of that I've written in my journals, but I don't remember it. It just went on and on and on and on and on.

It ended when Marvin got sick of being a single parent. By that time, it was quite a few years later. The children were 11 and 10, and he decided he wanted a holiday and called me up at the last minute and said, "You can have them for Easter." And I already had plans with my lover at the time, Cris South. We had a little boy, and we were going to the beach. We had a beach house, you know, rented for the weekend. And so I just — I mean, it's interesting where you — where you finally break through. And I just said to him, "I'd love to have them, but I'm going with my lover and if I can have them with my lover and her boy, then I'll take them. But otherwise, I already have plans. I have plans." I had just been — just ripped apart so many times around the children. So, I got them.

ANDERSON: So he said OK.

PRATT: He said OK. We went and spent Easter weekend down by the beach, and it was beautiful. We had a beautiful time. So, anyway, the story of my life with the children is a whole other, longer story.

But while I was making this life for myself in North Carolina without the children, that's when I fell back in with the *Feminary* folks. By then, the *Newsletter* had been renamed *Feminary*, after Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres*, the blank books that the women warriors wrote in. It gives you an idea of kind of where ideologically people were going into this lesbian cultural thing. And um, then the *Women in Print*

movement came along, and some of the women from Durham went to that and came back and learned how to print and decided they were going to turn *Feminary* into a monthly or quarterly or something that would refocus on women's liberation. And they did that, it's interesting, away from lesbian cultural stuff back into women's liberation stuff, right? But it didn't pick up. People weren't buying it.

ANDERSON: Wasn't lesbian in the title for a while?

28:00

PRATT: No. That was later.

ANDERSON: OK.

PRATT: That was after. And what happened is that they published a number of issues. I can't remember how many, but they were trying to do stuff that was about women's liberation. I wrote an article about organizing for the E.R.A. in Fayetteville. I wrote something about rape in Fayetteville. It was very women's-liberation focused, but it wasn't circulating. It wasn't circulating. And the old *Newsletter* had functioned as a community forum, calendar, and this was coming out quarterly and it just wasn't working. Mab [Segrest] said, "Let me do a special lesbian community issue." She did a special issue and it was snapped up, right? So –

ANDERSON: You guys must have been surprised. Did you know how deep the lesbian connection was?

PRATT: I wasn't working on it. I wasn't working on it at the time. This was all happening — I was organizing in Fayetteville and I was writing, but I wasn't working on it. Mab did this issue. Then I went, and Cris and Mab went, to a Southeast Lesbian and Gay Conference, and I'm pretty sure it was in Atlanta, and we were in a session where— *Sinister Wisdom* was in Charlotte at the time, and Harriet [Desmoines] and Catherine [Nicholson] were in Charlotte producing *Sinister Wisdom*, and they announced that they were moving it to Lincoln, Nebraska. And we were in a session when they announced this.

Now, my memory is that Mab leaned over to me and Cris and said, "We should turn *Feminary* into a lesbian magazine for the South." Mab doesn't remember it like that, and there's actually an article about this that was published in *North Carolina Quarterly* that comes out of East Carolina, where somebody interviewed both of us and put all this together. Anyway, that's how I remember it, and that's what happened. I joined the collective, Cris joined the collective. We turned it into this *Feminary: A Feminist Magazine for the South Emphasizing Lesbian Issues*.

ANDERSON: A rather lengthy subtitle. (laughter)

30:30

- PRATT: A rather length subtitle, but we found it necessary. And of course, what was significant, so significant, about *Feminary* — and, I think, it has never gotten its due, truly — is that we were all Southerners, and so dealing with racism was at the center of our agenda. We were white Southerners, and it was at the center. And, you know, *Conditions* was already in production. They were dealing in their own way with these issues, but it was a very different manner for us to be dealing with it.
- And we made mistakes. We were so focused on issues around racism against African American people, we made mistakes around other stuff. I can remember somebody who was Native Choctaw or Creek wrote to us from Oklahoma, wanting to send us stuff and we said, No, you're not Southern. And they blasted us, correctly, because of the forced resettlement. And we reevaluated ourselves and did a whole issue about what does it mean to be Southern in these different ways, and including Native voices and redrawing the map. I think that was our last issue. And we added an African American and an Arab member of the collective about half way through.
- ANDERSON: How large was the collective?
- PRATT: Well, I left — I moved from Durham in '82. I think that's right. Yeah, '82. And that was really the end. I mean, they tried to go on, but it just never — I mean, ahh, they were mad, my collective was mad at me. They were so mad.
- ANDERSON: But you left.
- PRATT: Oh, my gosh, they were mad that I left. Oh, they were mad. And what can I say? They were right, in a way. I mean, I was leaving for a relationship where I was reverting to old patterns of dependency and romance and trying to find adventure in that.
- ANDERSON: And you can talk a more about that tomorrow, on the next tape.
- PRATT: Yeah, because this gets us into the '80s.
- ANDERSON: Yeah, but in terms of *Feminary*, was it riddled with conflict in the way that so many feminist collectives are?
- PRATT: Well, no, and I think — I don't necessarily think that was good. I think this was about our Southern upbringing around —
- ANDERSON: So you guys were too polite to hash it out?
- PRATT: Or too repressed or too indirect or too passive-aggressive or whatever, but we didn't have big fights. I just remember one time when somebody burst out in a meeting and we were just, like, Oh my gosh. And of course, it wasn't a principled moment, either. The person was yelling at

33:20

me, actually. I think that it might have been about class, but the way that she articulated it was not clear that that was what it was, right? We did talk about issues of class in the collective, very directly, because the two working-class-identified members of the collective at the time — this was before Raymina [Mays] and Aida [Wakil] came in — Cris, who I was lovers with, and Eleanor Holland, the two working-class members, were also the printers. They were the ones who knew how to print. They were actually earning their living as printers. But it meant that the way the work got distributed, they ended up doing this physical labor to a far greater extent than some of us who were doing more editing. They were doing editorial work, too, but then they had this additional burden.

So we talked — we did, we talked about those things. We talked about race and racism, so-called race, racism. We had really interesting conversations about the intersections, what later got called the intersections. But that's what we were doing. We weren't just being lesbians. We were talking and then trying to implement a political, intellectual, cultural understanding of the intersections of race, so-called race, class, femaleness, maleness — not so much maleness — femaleness, and sexuality. Where we didn't have the intellectual tools was, we weren't able to go through to transgender issues. We weren't there.

ANDERSON: Nobody was.

PRATT: Nobody was. Well, I don't want to say nobody was, because Leslie was talking about this stuff.

ANDERSON: But nobody was in the women's movement.

PRATT: But in the women's movement, right. Well, in the — how do we describe it? Because, of course, there were —

ANDERSON: multiple women's movements, yeah, that's true. (both voices) In the mainstream women's movements.

PRATT: In the mainstream women's movement, or in the non-left women's movement, or — I mean, because she belonged to the party when she wrote *Transgender Liberation*, this little pamphlet, and that was in the '80s. [Or the 90s?] So, you know, the left-communist current of the women's liberation movement was getting this information, and of course, when I was coming out into women's liberation, the women I was coming into contact with were coming out of their Marxist study groups. They had been in Marxist study groups, but they were leaving them. And we were getting this mishmash, like, Shulamith Firestone, you know. And I — so I missed all that, right. So, anyway, this is to say, we were looking at these intersections in *Feminary* and having these incredibly intense conversations and workings out of them. And trying

to push forward to a political way of thinking that would be on the left, even though we didn't call it that.

I mean, I remember, for instance — you know how some people always know, always remember, where they were when Kennedy was assassinated, right? — well, I'll always remember where I was when we heard that the Klan had killed five Communists in Greensboro. I was in the *Feminary* office at the back of the YMCA, YWCA in Durham. We had a little back room where the press was and the light table and everything, and Mab came in and said, "The Klan has just killed these people in Greensboro." I was still living in Fayetteville. I'll never forget that. And Mab knew the wife of one of the guys who was killed. You know, because the left in Durham was very small. I was living in Fayetteville, so I didn't know people.

So we were grappling with anticommunism as well. You know, we weren't communists, but we were grappling with anticommunism, because we knew, because we were Southerners, we knew to what ends anticommunism had been used. We knew. So, there were so many things about coming out of the South into these political movements, that I feel like I knew things, people I was around knew things, that other people didn't necessarily know, because even though some of what I knew came because I had been raised in a white supremacist household, but I still knew it. I knew it, you know. And I could put it to good purpose later on because of that.

ANDERSON: We can end there.

39:33

END DVD 4

DVD 5 [March 17, 2005]

PRATT: What I'm trying to write, it isn't written yet. I have about half a book that I haven't been able to finish. It's exactly about this. I want it to be the first book by a lesbian grandmother, but it's not behaving.

ANDERSON: You'd better hurry.

PRATT: I know, I know. I mean, there're plenty of us out there. It's not like there are not a lot of us out there already. OK.

ANDERSON: OK. So, it's day two, it's March 17th. We're back at Minnie Bruce's, and we're going to go back and just talk about a couple of things about the '70s. Is there something you wanted to start with, or do you want me to ask the questions?

PRATT: Why don't I just say that one of the things I realized that when I was skimming through my *Feminary* history yesterday, I didn't actually name everybody that I worked with, and that the history of *Feminary* is a much longer history than we have time for today, and actually there are people who have done some writing about that. But I do want to say that when I joined the collective — and it was always a collective, even when it was the *Newsletter*, it was always a collective — so when we talk about the *Feminary* collective, really you're talking about over a decade of collectivity. But when I came into it, which was when Mab said, "Let's make it a lesbian literary journal for the South," when I came into it, it was Mab Segrest, Susan Ballinger, then I came in, Helen Langa, Eleanor Holland. They were really the graphics people, but they also wrote, too. Eleanor was a printer. Cris South came in, joined. And then there were some people who sort of came and went, but weren't so steady. That group was really the steady group for a while.

And Susan dropped out about half way through my time at the collective, and then into the collective came Aida Wakil, who was Arab and Iraqi and Raymina Mays, who was an African American lesbian originally from Georgia. And they were in the collective at the time I left it. So they later — Raymina and Aida were lovers, became lovers, and later moved to Washington and edited, briefly, a newsletter for women of color called *Between Ourselves*, very briefly. So they were kind of a spinoff from *Feminary*.

And *Feminary* then got handed over to women on the West Coast, including, I think, Jean Swallow, for a while, and there actually were a couple of issues that came out of the West Coast, and then it sort of — that was the end of it. So those were the women I worked with. I'm still in touch with almost all of them, and I, you know, I loved that collective.

ANDERSON: Most of what you wrote and published in *Feminary*, was it poetry, or were you writing essays or articles?

PRATT:

Both. I really started writing essays because of *Feminary*. I really did. And the conversations that we were having about what did it mean to be a lesbian and a Southerner and antiracist, and all that — that's really why I started writing essays. So the very first essay that I wrote, which was "Rebellion," about my mother and my grandmothers and, you know, the racism in my family and the sort of Southernness of my life and my rejection of certain aspects of that — that was the lead essay to an issue of *Feminary* that was called *Rebellion*. It's like the *Rebellion* issue. And then I started writing some long poems that were called the Maps poems, and I can't remember if all of them — see, now, I can't remember. I know at least one of them was published in *Feminary*, and some other poems that I wrote.

3:33

So, really, I was writing essays and Mab was writing essays, but she was also writing poetry and I was writing poetry. We were in a poetry group, like, criticism work group together for a while, she and I and some other people. And Cris was writing. Cris was writing a novel. She was writing poetry. Eleanor and Helen were doing their art. Raymina was writing short stories. Aida, I think she maybe did more prose. I don't think she was as much of a writer — I don't remember as much of her work, and that was a little bit later on in the process.

But we were all writing, and producing the magazine at the same time, and organizing. Because I was still in Fayetteville for most of that time, so I was organizing in Fayetteville, and they were organizing in Durham. They were part of Triangle Area Lesbian Feminist Alliance, TALF — there was TALF in Durham and there was ALFA in Atlanta — Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance. And ALFA was a spin-off of TALF, because some people from Durham went down and they were part of starting it down there.

So there was all the organizing that was going on. I can remember I went to the first, what I believe was the first, lesbian-gay demonstration in North Carolina, so far as I know, which was in Durham in, I think, 1981, right before I moved — I think it was in '81, before I moved to Washington. Um, a man had been beaten to death at a cruising spot by one of the rivers near the Raleigh-Durham area, one of the creeks. And he was a married man. It was an area that was known to be a kind of gay cruising area. Who knows what his sexuality was, but he was beaten to death because the attackers assumed that he was a gay man. And we held a demonstration in front of the county courthouse in Durham, protesting and publicizing the wrongness of that death. And Mab wrote a statement — um, it's interesting, I can't remember if the heading was We Want to Live or We Don't Want to Die — anyway, we had a statement, she wrote it, we passed it out.

There was just a lot. You and I were talking about this yesterday, about this false dichotomy between people who do cultural work and people who do political work, and we were all doing political work and cultural work at the same time. And that demonstration is kind of a —

ANDERSON: Good example?

PRATT: Good example of it. It was a very eloquent statement, very lyrical, and it was also a political statement and we handed it out to the press.

8:00

ANDERSON: It's also a good reminder of how connected the gay and lesbian movement and the women's movement were.

PRATT: Yes, absolutely.

ANDERSON: That kind of crossover.

PRATT: Absolutely. Especially, again, outside the bigger urban areas, and in the smaller towns and in the South, we just all knew each other. We were all at the same bars, you know. It wasn't like there were political people and bar people.

ANDERSON: Right. Or feminists and then lesbians on the other side of –

PRATT: Right, exactly. Or gay men and — there just weren't that many of us and we were also in it together. We didn't all socialize all together, but whenever something like this happened, then we were all — I remember when we organized for this demonstration, you know. We were all in a big room together talking about, Well, what are we going to do. So that was typical of my experience from the time I was in Fayetteville all the way through my North Carolina years. (pause in recording)

ANDERSON: This may not be so relevant for *Feminary*, but I'm interested in what kind of conversations were happening among women's liberationists or feminists about lesbianism. You had talked about witnessing some relationships and knowing about some lesbian pairings or the collective houses, but how did it get talked about? Was it controversial? Was it a given? Was it a place of tension and controversy?

PRATT: It was definitely a place of tension within women's liberation, and I can only talk so concretely about where I was located (both voices), right. So, for instance, in Fayetteville, we're doing all this really great organizing. I would say that at the time that we were doing that organizing in Fayetteville, it was a time of transition from people talking about the movement as women's liberation to people talking about movement as the feminist movement.

That was the time of transition, and, uh, I probably identified more as feminist. Even though I'd had these relationships with people who had come out into women's liberation in Durham and in Chapel Hill, I hadn't had exactly that experience. It wasn't a very long period of time. It was really rather brief. And by the time I was sort of into things, and had moved to Fayetteville, I was removed from that. And so, I'd say I

11:0

thought of myself more as a feminist by that point, and not as a women's liberationist.

It's interesting, because now I identify myself as a women's liberationist, as part of women's liberation. I feel that part of my journey has been to sort of return to an original vision of women's liberationists' tie to liberation struggles, and that has been very fruitful for me in more recent years. And it is about connecting to other struggles, as opposed to sort of building a more separate — I don't mean separatist, but a more separate — feminist movement.

So, um, I was in Fayetteville, we were doing all this great organizing, and of course, one of the points of attack that we were being subjected to was lesbian baiting by the right wing. I would go and debate these Eagle Forum women and they would be saying these things, like, They'll be homosexual marriages, and We'll have unisex bathrooms — all the things that we are having.

ANDERSON: That people couldn't have imagined 30 years ago.

PRATT: Right, right. The opposition was right on target, you know? Right. And of course, part of the weakness of feminism, as it was being practiced at that time, inside NOW and outside of NOW, was that there wasn't strong leadership standing up to that baiting. So we weren't saying, Fine, it would be great if homosexuals could get married, it would be great if lesbians could get married. We weren't saying that. We weren't saying, Right, unisex bathrooms: people shouldn't have to worry. And of course, why not? Because there hadn't been a strong LGB movement yet and there hadn't been a transgender movement yet, and we didn't have the concepts to deal with that. We just didn't.

ANDERSON: Were you out when you would do those public appearances?

PRATT: No, no, no, no, no.

ANDERSON: Not at all.

PRATT: Not at all. Not at all. A lot of them were before I came out as a lesbian. Not a lot, but a certain number were before I came out as a lesbian, and then some were after. There was tremendous fear — with reason. I lost custody of my children. Other people lost their jobs. For instance, when I was teaching at Fayetteville State — I taught there for five years, and the summer before my last year, I believe it was the summer before my last year, which would have been around 1980 — I came back from summer break, and I met my friend, Nettie Jackson, I think that was her last name, in the parking lot, and she says, "Hi, how are you? What's going on?" and I said, "I'm fine." She said, "Have you heard?" I said, "What?" and she said, "They fired all the lesbians." I said, "What? I didn't know there were any other lesbians at Fayetteville State. I didn't know that." And she said — well, she didn't say lesbians. She said they

fired everybody who was “funny,” all the women who were “funny.” And, you know, somebody’s wife was caught in bed with another woman and all this stuff came out, and all these women were fired. There were several of them. There were more than two. All African American, all African American. I said to Nettie, “Didn’t you know I was funny, too? Didn’t you know I was a lesbian?” She said, “You? No.”

15:00

So even though I was very — they all knew I was involved in women’s liberation and even though there was all this lesbian baiting, people would look at me and they just couldn’t imagine that I was a lesbian. They just couldn’t imagine it, I mean — because I was femme, I’m sure that’s why. So, I was not out. I didn’t deny it to people, but it was hard for me to figure out how out I could be and not actually lose the chance to even see my children, because I was in the middle of this terrible custody stuff, and there was always the chance. I mean, my lawyer said, “You could easily never see them again.” So, I was treading this fine line. It was clear that you would lose your job. Everybody was very afraid of losing their jobs.

I can remember we had — as I sort of segued more into doing more lesbian-oriented stuff, by that time, I was living in a household with two other women who were lesbians, and then, there were some other women in town, and we started to try to do some lesbian cultural work, and we had a little cultural group. I can’t remember what we called ourselves. What did we call ourselves? LAF, Lesbian something Fayetteville. That’s what we called ourselves. Lesbian Association of Fayetteville, or something like that. Anyway, I think it lasted for two milliseconds, right? It was very short-lived. But we started to try to do this cultural stuff, and we had some people come up from Charlotte and do a one-woman play, and that was probably — we were very careful about how we publicized it, so it didn’t say lesbian anywhere. It was all coded. But it was a lesbian event. And I don’t know, maybe that was the first one ever in Fayetteville.

And we tried to have monthly pot lucks. We would have one at our house and then we’d have one in somebody’s trailer, you know. There was a P.E. coach at the Methodist College who was lesbian, and there were women at the air force base and the army base who were lesbians, I don’t know. We went to the bar — I don’t know how we found people. And I’ll never forget — and I may have written about this, I’m sure I have — one night at our house where we had this pot luck — and there was Lucy, who was a butcher, and Donna, who was a social worker, and these two women who owned a little jewelry store in the mall and somebody who was a teacher and me, I was a teacher, and the P.E. teacher — and there we all were, all white, trying to talk to each other. And I went to the bathroom and there was the P.E. teacher throwing up in the bathroom — out of fear, I can only assume. I mean, out of stress. I mean, it was just so hard to — I mean, we were trying, but it was like, who are we? What do we even say to each other? And to bring those relationships out of the bar into another arena was very difficult,

because all our socializing and all our ways of being lesbian in Fayetteville — not at TALF, but in Fayetteville — these were bar lesbians, bar dykes. And there was a lot of gaminess, you know.

Plus, just the isolation. I mean, again, this is totally typical. I'll never forget, Donna and I and some other people drove to Durham. We did that all the time. It was 50 miles. You get in the car, you go to the bar. You go to Blueberry Hill, or whatever, the Electric Company. You go to Durham to go to the bar, because the bar in Fayetteville was about the size of these two rooms. And Donna met somebody there and brought her home and they were together for, like, months. Because where were you even going to meet somebody? How were you even going to meet someone new? How were you going to find somebody? So you found somebody and you slept with them and then — all those jokes about lesbians moving in together. It's like, of course we were moving in with each other, because who knew when you would even see them again if you didn't just get together. So, the level of oppression around our connecting to each other, our talking to each other, our communicating, our being with each other, it was intense. It was very, very intense.

I started going to see a therapist in Durham, the only lesbian therapist in the state of North Carolina, and I can't remember how I found her — probably through somebody in Durham, you know. I went to see her and she had another client in Fayetteville. And at some point, this person was having trouble getting back to Fayetteville. Something happened with her car, I don't know. My therapist said, "Could you give her a ride home?" I said, "Sure. No problem." So I gave this woman a ride home. Again, you know, bar dyke, working-class lesbian, lived in a trailer outside Spring Hill [or] some little outskirts of Fayetteville. And I was pleasant and nice and friendly to her and she said, "Won't you come in and, like, have a cup of coffee or whatever." And I went in. And then, I don't know, I guess she sort of made a pass at me but just verbally, and I said no. And I got up to leave. She said to me, "You'd better watch out. You'll get in trouble acting like you act."

But of course, it was the gap between how lesbians who were closeted and had limited social contact interacted with each other. And me, who'd had this other way of interacting with lesbians that was not primarily social but political, where it was like, of course, I can go to somebody's home and talk to them and be friendly and interested and all that, and it not imply anything more than that. But for her, it meant something completely different. And that pretty much gives you the range of what it was like. I was on the cusp of those two worlds, I really was.

I met my second lover at a NOW conference in Charlotte. She was —

ANDERSON: Is this Cris South?

22:30

PRATT: This is Cris. She was a lesbian mother. I was very connected with her immediately because of our shared motherhood. She was the only other

lesbian mother I had met. She didn't have her child. It was a big deal to meet her.

What we did for entertainment on the Saturday night of the NOW conference is we all went to the gay bar. The straight women, you know, the women who had made up their minds, the lesbians, the gay women, you know. Cris identified as gay at the time, not as a lesbian, right? And there was a drag show. And that, again, it goes back to what we were saying about how these worlds were not separated out. We went to a NOW conference, we went to the bar, there were gay men doing their drag show at the bars. We all loved it. It was great. That was the way things were at the time. And the women who were in NOW were almost all straight women — not all of them but, you know, maybe about half of them were very wary of my bringing my lesbian stuff out, because they had their own internalized anti-lesbian stuff to deal with, so —

ANDERSON: Did you call yourself a lesbian feminist in the '70s?

PRATT: Yes, I did. I did. By the late '70s, by the end of my years at Fayetteville, and by the time I moved to Durham, which I lived in Durham for about a year and a half or two years before I moved up to Washington, I was definitely calling myself a lesbian feminist by end. Yeah. By then, I was very deeply immersed in lesbian feminist cultural work because of *Feminary*, going to national conferences, going to the NWSA conference in Lawrence, Kansas, for instance, in '79, I met the women from *Conditions* there. I met Elly Bulkin there. I met Julia Penelope there and that was when I saw Tee Corinne present her work for the first time and — I may be mishmashing a couple of these conferences together, but those conferences which are, like, '79, '80 or '81, right in there, that work was emerging. Liz Kennedy presented on Buffalo at one of those conferences and I heard her.

I heard Barbara Smith speak — no, I didn't hear her speak. I was doing a panel — this was in '79 — I was doing a panel on co-teaching a women's studies course at Fayetteville State, a women's studies [course]. I co-taught with an African American woman, Izola Young. She and I co-taught a class on African American feminism from 1952 to the present in '78, '79, at Fayetteville State. And I did a paper about co-teaching that class, and somebody who had met me in another context, a Jewish feminist whose name I don't remember now, brought Barbara Smith to meet me after hearing me do that panel. That was when I met Barbara.

ANDERSON: That's neat.

26:10

PRATT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then, later, I heard her speak. Maybe at that same conference, I can't remember now. So, I very — you know, by that point, by '79, I definitely made the transition, at least internally, considering myself a lesbian feminist. But in Fayetteville, you know, we

were doing good just to get us all together, you know, and people's definitions were all over the place, all over the place. I mean, I remember when the Charlotte women — now, where were we, was it at the NOW conference where I met Cris? which would've been '78, I guess — I remember hearing that the Charlotte women were coming, the Charlotte dykes were coming, and I had this visualization of them as being, like, in black leather and chains. I mean, I was just sure — motorcycle dykes. Now, where — you know, it's so interesting, where in the world did I pick up that image, when I could barely remember the first time I'd heard the word lesbian and I never remembered hearing the word dyke. Never. But I knew what a dyke looked like: masculine woman in leather and chains, right? And then they showed up.

ANDERSON: What'd they look like?

PRATT: Well, they were in, like, granny dresses. They were like hippies. They were. (Anderson laughs) Harriet, not Catherine. I don't remember what Catherine had on, but there was this group, and they were like hippie women. It was a shock. It was very salutary.

ANDERSON: That's funny.

PRATT: Oh, it was great. It was great.

ANDERSON: That brings me to one of my other questions that I mentioned earlier, which was about butch-femme, and androgyny, and how you were finding your way in terms of gender expression in the '70s, and what kind of pressures you felt, or —

PRATT: Well, I think it's important. I do talk about this but I'm actually not — well, I have. I wrote about it a little bit in *S/He*. I think it's important, again, that Southern experiences of things not being so split up. So, for instance, when I went to the great Southeast Lesbian Conference in Atlanta in 1975, I was still married when I went. And there were political workshops including how to answer the FBI when they come to the door, because that was when Susan Sachs was being hunted. There was a workshop on lesbians with boy children. That was very difficult, because none of us had our children. So there were these political workshops. It was in Little Five Points in Atlanta, and we went from home to home. It was when lesbians had already bought up homes in that area, and we just went from porch to porch, having these workshops on these porches of these lesbians' houses in Atlanta, in Little Five Points. And the ALFA house was sort of the headquarters.

Anyway, at night, again, what happened for entertainment? We went to one of the theaters in the Little Five Points area — don't remember which one. There were about 300 lesbians in this theater. Before the entertainment started, we were all singing, "I've been cheated, been mistreated, when will I be loved." And then the entertainment was the

Dykes of the American Revolution, the DAR. They identified themselves as a socialist feminist group, right? And the people in this group did a drag show. They did. They had somebody, you know, one person — one woman in leather, with a whip, and Peaches was in a tuxedo, and they did “Steam Heat.” You know, it was a drag show. It was a lesbian feminist drag show with a butch and a femme.

And my friend Elizabeth, who was, you know, my introduction to lesbian life, she completely identified as a femme. Hair down to her butt. Never cut it. Has never cut — you know, so far as I know, has always worn her hair long. Um, the concept of butch and femme was floating around. I knew, for instance, when I got together with Cris, that I was getting together with a butch, you know. She was all butch, comb in her back pocket —

ANDERSON: You said that so much of the community was bar dykes, working class — of course, butch-femme was going to be a part of that.

PRATT: Right. So it was floating around, and we didn’t talk about it that much, although I talked about it a little bit with Elizabeth, but it just was. It just was. I mean, Cris — wallet in the back pocket, comb in the back pocket, you know.

ANDERSON: So how did you understand yourself in this matrix?

31:10

PRATT: Well, this is what’s interesting to me about it. So these concepts were out there and people were living these lives, and when you — I sort of vaguely remember when I got together, you know, Elizabeth talking to me about who I was attracted to in those terms. But they weren’t at the top of our consciousness and they weren’t concepts that were helping us figure out what was happening to us, exactly, but just floating around out there. And so, what it meant for me was that some of those bitter divisions that happened in other places around sexuality, like all the conversations around penetration, which I only found out years later were going on in Washington. You know, the very idea that you wouldn’t be penetrated, we didn’t even — it’s like, what? What’s the problem? I mean, not that we were talking really explicitly, but I never got — there was no conversation about, that’s not a feminist way to do sex. That just wasn’t happening. And so, there was not that kind of bitter, I don’t know, politicizing, around sex lives.

On the other hand, I didn’t get any help understanding that I was still experiencing stereotyping around femininity. Well, wait. I want to take that back. We weren’t talking about it in a systematic way, but — here’s a really good example of how there was some usefulness to these categories out there. I was at NWSA and I was in a session with Julia Penelope, so this must have been — I don’t even know, I can’t even remember, was it ’79? one of them — I was in a session with Julia and Elly that was a big session, and we started having discussion about tactics, about dealing with homophobia, with straight women, in this big

session. And Julia was being very — you know, like, oh god, something about toilet seats, I can't remember. It was some outrageous thing, you know, [like] Lesbianism is catching, a lesbian just sat here on the toilet seat, or something, I don't know. It was something like that, right. And I was just like, Oh. So I said something based [on] being in Fayetteville and being in this completely different situation. I said something much more ameliorating. Well, we just need to talk to them and mmmmm.

And Julia was furious, and just screamed at me. But the thing that really got me the most was that she said my name in this very belittling, contemptuous way. And I know it doesn't sound like much, but to have someone use your name in this very contemptuous, sarcastically demeaning way was just devastating. My stuff around my name is complicated anyway, right, and she just used it, right? So I left that session and I went into the bathroom crying. I was just crying. Sitting in the stall, crying. And Harriet Desmoines, Ellenberger now, came after me and said to me, "I thought you might be upset. Don't be so upset. Don't be upset. Julia always talks to femmes like that." Now Harriet, being a femme herself, having dealt with Julia, because they moved *Sinister Wisdom* to Nebraska, I'm sure knew what she was talking about.

So there were these pieces, but I didn't put them all together until much later, that there were butches who could be messed up around their gender expression and take it out on femmes, you know. I didn't have an analysis until later. But I got these little pieces of it, you know.

And the other part of it was there was a lot of pressure, a certain amount of pressure around androgyny, a certain amount of pressure around androgyny. And when I talked to Leslie about it, for instance, because we had these long conversations about all of this, I said to her, you know what was happening is that we were a generation of women who had been acculturated, all of us, into femininity, so we had to break with our acculturation into femininity, and learn how to change the oil in our cars, or how to change tires and how to do all this stuff that we had not been allowed or taught to do — wear pants, wear fatigue pants, which I did for years. I had got, wore this stuff out of Fayetteville. I would go to the army stores and buy, you know, these paratrooper pants. I was wearing boots and paratrooper pants. But I was also wearing little pink voile tops with orange ribbons.

So, breaking with that femininity, learning how not to be passive-aggressive, not sneaky, not, you know, not woman-to-woman passive-aggressive, you know, all that stuff, we had learned. About how to be with each other as women. We had to unlearn it all. So we went in this other direction which, to us, was around androgyny. It's like, OK, we're not going to be feminine women. We're going to be androgynous. Not all of us did that, um, but I certainly did, because I had a lot to unlearn. A lot to unlearn.

ANDERSON: Right. And then you could come back and claim it again.

PRATT: Exactly.

ANDERSON: More mindful.

PRATT: Exactly. And of course, I didn't completely give it up. I mean, I had my little orange ribbon. And I'll never forget, um, Bonnie what's-her-name, [Zimmerman] does all the work on the novels. *A History of the Lesbian Novel*. Gosh, I can't remember her name now, her last name. Anyway, again, NWSA, I was in my paratrooper pants and my little pink shirt and my little orange ribbon, and Bonnie coming up and, like, toying with my ribbon. You know, it's like, Oh, that's a really cute little ribbon there. You know, just these tiny gestures around femme identity, that were still perceived, you know, still related to by the people who connected to that. So, um, that was how things were around femmeness for me, really into the late '80s and early '90s. That level of awareness was kind of where I stayed. It lasted for quite a long time. You know, it was lesbian feminists, and femme was bubbling around, but claiming it as an identity and knowing really what that meant for me, that didn't come until right before I met Leslie.

ANDERSON: OK. We're going to stop there.

39:27

END DVD 5

DVD 6

ANDERSON: So, should we start talking about how you got to D.C.?

PRATT: Yes, yes.

ANDERSON: There's so much to pick up on, here. Do you want to start with Joan Biren? Is that how you went north? (both voices)

PRATT: Yes, it's how I went north. I've been thinking about this, actually, quite a bit recently, and I referred to it a little bit yesterday when I said that my collective was really angry with me leaving. And, oh gosh, what a time that was. It really was a very interesting time. I think one of the things that perhaps younger lesbians don't know about that time, you know, when they read this academic stuff about feminism and how straight-laced it was, or how genderphobic it was, or how queer-phobic it was — and certainly Betty Friedan and "the lavender menace," yes, but my current, no, no, no. For instance, we were all being non-monogamous. Everybody was being non-monogamous.

ANDERSON: In a mindful, conscious —

PRATT: In a completely public and political way. I mean, it was about breaking — I mean, having analysis of monogamy as being part of property relationships, that much we had inherited from, you know, more historical materialistic analysis that was, again, breaking out of what we'd been acculturated into. We don't believe in people owning each other. What would it mean to have these relationships that were not defined within marriage? What would that mean? What would it mean? We were finding out.

ANDERSON: And talk about not knowing the history, I mean, that's what feminists were doing a hundred years before.

PRATT: Yes.

ANDERSON: The free lovers at the time. (both voices)

PRATT: Yes, yes, and did we know any of that? No-o-o, no, we knew none of it, you know, or we were reading these little coded histories of women who were working in labor organizing and settlements and trying to figure out if they were lesbian or not, like who were sleeping with who, you know? So, we were all being non-monogamous and — well, all, I mean, Helen and Eleanor were never non-monogamous. They were always a couple. They were a very devoted couple. But there was a lot of experimentation going on. And I was with Cris but we had an agreement, you know, that we would take other lovers, and we did, and there were quite a bunch of different complications, including, you

know, just this sort of daisy chain of lovers stretching all the way to Tennessee at one point, all the way to Tennessee at one end and to Washington at the other end, you know. And we would make jokes about that.

So, I was with Cris and when I met Joan, which happened in '81 at a NWSA conference. And so, I met her. I began a relationship. Lots of ins and outs around that, and I maintained my relationship with Cris for about a year. And Joan was involved with somebody else, too, at the time. So, a lot — you know, having a non-monogamous relationship was so time consuming.

ANDERSON: Were you just living alone, you and Cris?

PRATT: I was living alone. Cris was living out in Hillsborough, actually, in the place that Mab had lived for a while, out in Hurdle Mills, actually out in the country, in an old sharecropper's house, and I was living in Durham by then, and then I would go up to Washington or Joan would come down. Anyway, I don't really want to go into the ins and outs of that relationship, but what I have thought about — and this is the part of what I wanted to add about yesterday's conversation — I've thought about the interplay between personal patterns and the larger social change, [about] movements that were happening and also just the fundamental material conditions of someone's life. So, like, yesterday, we were talking about my father and, you know, the impact of my father's racism on me, the impact of my family's history when I found that out, and the civil rights movement. But none of those things really propelled me into action until I was in the concrete circumstances of a woman trying to figure out how I was going to earn a living, you know, being turned down for jobs, not being able to figure out how I was going to hold my life together. *That* is really what did it. That's what did it.

4:00

And then, sort of flowing out of that process of change, losing custody of my children, and having that just concretely physical blow. It can hardly get more — and I know you know this as a mother — it can hardly get more concrete and physical than having your four-year-old taken from you and not being able to hold them. Period. Hold them one week a year. And that was just devastating to me. So, those things which affected me in this direct, fundamental, kind of material way were the things that propelled me into the movement. I was able to then gather in these experiences that I had had in my life and make use of them.

But, for instance, I didn't really grapple with my ignorance around African American life and history and how much I needed to know about it, until I was teaching at Fayetteville State. And I couldn't make it in my classroom. I really wouldn't have survived if I hadn't adjusted my attitude and gotten myself together. I would've been out of a job, and I needed that job, because I didn't have a husband anymore. As I say somewhere, one definition of a lesbian is a woman who has a job.

So there's this interplay between sort of family experience and family history and what's going on in the larger, more politically — and then what is it that finally puts us in a place where we can act. And I finally came to that place by the circuitous route that most people come to it, I think. What is it that produces an activist and a consciously thinking person? It's a very circuitous process. It's not straightforward at all.

And I've thought about this in the context of my relationships, because it's true that each one of my relationships, every one of my significant relationships, have been with people who I felt might propel me into a new world. And that's a very traditional female choice, to choose someone who you feel like will be the door through which then you can pass into a new world. Now, I know that's also something that humans do in their relationships, that they often look for something in someone else that they don't have, and so forth. But I think that what happened with me was more traditionally female. It was a door to another life. And I joke about this sometimes. I say, you know, I'm the generation where you wanted to be something but you married it. My cousin Anne wanted to be a veterinarian. She married a veterinarian. She put him through school. She's an insurance, uh —

8:00

ANDERSON: Adjustor?

PRATT: Adjuster now, right. I was going to be a poet. You know, there was a brief little glimmer there before I married, about being a poet. I married a poet. And then our professors, our English professors, actually sat in our living room and assigned us our roles. They said, at this little tea party we gave after we were married: Marvin, you're going to be the poet. Minnie Bruce, you're going to be the college professor. They actually said it, you know.

So, I would be attracted to people and there was just this possibility of another life. And then, of course, it would close down, because that's not how you get to a new life. But I also did, to some degree, get to another life with these people, I did, beyond where I had been. So I think that's the aspect of the way my personal conditioning has affected these choices. I've never moved to a town without moving for a lover, or with a lover. Never. On the other hand — so there's that traditional conditioning. On the other hand, I never wanted to be with someone for purely personal reasons. It was always about a larger horizon, you know. I was interested in their politics. I was already trying to figure out something that they were involved in. So, my curiosity and my intellect were already in play, and then I would find these people.

ANDERSON: So, what did Joan offer, then?

10:52

PRATT: Joan offered a larger lesbian life, a national life, intellectual life beyond the region, a life that was characteristic of the '80s, where we were — you know, everything was exploding: bookstores, presses, graphics,

scholarship, history, everything. And I already had some experience of that, and then I more fully entered into that world by going to Washington. And of course, her background — there were ways in which that world was a political sidetrack for me. Because it was so focused on lesbian feminist life and so internal, as opposed to the work that I had been doing, which was really about intersections with the larger community.

ANDERSON: So, was that frustrating to you at the time?

PRATT: No, no. I clearly must have needed to do that, you know. And it was, I suppose, about building this internal self and this external self that I had not ever had — constructing that. You know, I started teaching almost immediately in the women's studies program at Maryland, so I had an intellectual life. I had a presence that I hadn't had before, and it was an individual presence, as opposed to being part of a collective. And it was leaving behind this notion of collectivity that was still in play within lesbian feminist life in many, many, many ways, but my own collective, I had reached the limit of what I could do there, I think. It's so hard to go back and even reanalyze your own life. But I think, you know, intellectually, I had hit the limit of what I could do there, and it was complicated by personal stuff, but it wasn't just about that.

It was about — and I thought about this a lot last week, when I was at a lecture by Anne Braden, who is a white antiracist activist who was born in Alabama and is 80 now, and she's done most of her organizing in the South. She identifies herself as a Southern chauvinist, and I listened to her talk — and I have great, great, great admiration for her — but there were just a number of things that she didn't take up, and I think she didn't take those things up because her focus is regional. And I thought to myself, If I hadn't left, maybe I would still have certain limitations around my thinking that I feel like I've been trying to break through.

ANDERSON: And I see a lot of that in *Rebellion*, in terms of your taking on questions of Jewish identity and anti-Semitism. I mean, Joan shows up a lot in terms of those anecdotes and pushing your thinking forward.

14:45

PRATT: Right, right. That's right. And that was significant in our relationship. It was a very significant part of our relationships, of cross boundary, I guess, would be the best way of talking about that. Cross boundary. We didn't deal at all well with cross boundary around butch-femme. That was all unspoken, all un-dealt with, and it was a very difficult part of our relationship, extremely difficult, and painful. The dealing with anti-Semitism was also painful, but it was in the context of trying to understand, trying to change, trying to break through to sort of another place. I mean, there was motion, there was growth around that.

So, I ended up in Washington. I was then at this new stage. In some ways it was very fruitful, and in some ways it was — I don't want to say

a divergence, it was just a shifting of focus away from the kind of on-the-ground organizing that I had done in North Carolina.

ANDERSON: Weren't you doing LIPS though?

PRATT: Yes, but –

ANDERSON: What was that?

PRATT: Well, it was very different organizing in Washington than in North Carolina, very, very, very different. For one thing, local organizing in Washington is hell, because everything in Washington is national, even local [issues]. I mean, for instance, Washington is still not a state. Still not a state. I mean, one of the main issues around local organizing was trying to get statehood. Why can Washington not get statehood? Because that's a national issue, you know. So, it really — I was used to doing organizing in a very local way. That didn't apply, it really didn't apply in Washington, so I was a little bit at sea. But what I did do was I took what I had learned and I began to apply that to antiracist work in D.C. I did begin to do some of that. And I started writing.

ANDERSON: You published *Yours in Struggle*.

PRATT: I published *Yours in Struggle*. Well, Elly and Jan published *Yours in Struggle*. Long Haul Press. How I became part of that is interesting.

ANDERSON: OK. Why don't we talk about that and then we'll go back to the organizing in D.C.

PRATT: Yeah. I can talk some about organizing in D.C., but so much of my life in D.C. was really about national lesbian connections and writing and intellectual and cultural work, as opposed to organizing, and I can talk some about that.

Now, I want to talk about the '87 actions, because of our conversation. Anyway, *Yours in Struggle* came about because — and I don't know that anybody has ever told this story. Elly was working on this long essay on being Jewish and on left Jewish feminism. And that came out of some very specific things that were going on in her life which I will not talk about — that's her business. It was a difficult essay for her. She had connected to Barbara Smith. They knew each other through Conditions, and they were neighbors in Brooklyn at the time. Barbara was with Cherríe, I think, at the time. Cherríe Moraga and she had approached Barbara about writing a companion piece, so that it was sort of a black-Jewish dialogue.

I had been asked to speak at — gosh, it was in Columbus in '83, I don't remember the dates, anyway — at the NWSA in Columbus, as part of a panel that was really about cultural and national differences, you know, racism and anti-Semitism in the women's movement, and

Evie Beck was on that panel and I'm sure I was asked to speak, because she knew me. She was my chair at Maryland. She was on that panel. Barbara Cameron, who is a Native American, was on that panel. There was an Arab American woman whose name I'm forgetting right now. Barbara was on that panel. There was a Latina whose name I can't remember right now, and me. And I spoke — and I did a little piece that then went on to become the piece in *Yours in Struggle*. And Barbara and I, after that panel, were in the bathroom, and Barbara said to me, "We're working on this book, Elly and I, and I think maybe you should be part of it."

So that's how that came about. So that was a whole trajectory for me around articulating what I knew about doing antiracist work, all the stuff that I had figured out over the last ten years, and trying to put that into place in the service of building unity within what was feminism, or women's liberation, right, [combating] racism, and then anti-Semitism — what I was exploring in knowing Joan and also currents of Jewish feminists that I knew in Washington. So that was the whole trajectory that I was working on. And that meant I did workshops for the Sojourner Truth School, which was a feminist community school that was in place at the time. I sometimes did group work with feminist organizations in the town who were trying to figure out stuff around how to be antiracist, you know. I did that kind of work.

So I was doing that. I was escaping the sex wars, or I had escaped the sex wars. The Barnard conference must have happened right around the time I moved to Washington. As I said to you earlier, it was, like, What the heck is going on here? I couldn't believe people were being so vicious to each other around this. I couldn't. I couldn't believe it. And I was just never — I just —

ANDERSON: And there was this unnamed dynamic going on in your own relationship at the time, so it must have felt very —

PRATT: Right. Right, right, right.

ANDERSON: — anxiety producing to you to even, from a distance —

22:40

PRATT: Well, it was baffling to me, and also — now I didn't articulate it to myself in this way exactly at the time, but there was a group in D.C. called Feminists Against Pornography, and they took a different line than some of the other people who were doing the more egregious baiting —

ANDERSON: The Women Against Pornography?

PRATT: Yeah, Woman Against Pornography. Feminists Against Pornography were much more principled and they were doing an economic analysis. You know, they were talking about the industry. They weren't talking about people's sex lives. They were talking about the impact of

pornography industry on the lives of women. They weren't talking about whether you were using lipstick or not. They weren't talking about whether you were a femme. They were talking about the impact on people's lives. And that was very useful, because, I thought, I understand this, you know, I agree with this. It's not scapegoating individual women for their sexual choices, right?

ANDERSON: Right.

PRATT: So. Washington was a little, you know, out of it in terms of the sex wars. At least, in my currents, I didn't get drawn in, really, in any way. And —

ANDERSON: But you would've if you'd published *S/He* ten years earlier.

PRATT: But of course, I couldn't have, because —

ANDERSON: True.

PRATT: — I hadn't figured it all out by then. I didn't get drawn into the sex wars, and as I said to you, again, as I said to you earlier, I was able to play a rather interesting role politically in the '87 demonstrations against *Bowers v. Hardwick*, Supreme Court decision. And in the context of that, I talked about LIPS. When the U.S. invaded Grenada, my circle was very upset. We'd been doing — gosh, I mean, I say we hadn't been organizing, but of course, there was this period in Washington where we were — again, it was all national organizing. The antiapartheid demonstrations were taking place at the South African embassy and I — you know, we were all getting arrested. They were scheduling arrests every day. It was part of the campaign to highlight, right? And so, the day I got arrested was Valentine's Day and I got arrested with Sweet Honey in the Rock.

ANDERSON: Oh, lucky you.

25:40

PRATT: It was kind of amazing. We're standing at the door of the South African embassy, singing, "We will not be moved, like a tree standing by the water." That was a great moment. So, I'm in jail with Bernice [Johnson Reagon] and it was one of those moments. I've been in jail in a lot worse circumstances. They were treating us well, right? So, we're at this kind of plush little community room and instead of taking you into a cell and terrorizing you, they were taking us up to a table and taking our information in front of everybody, right. So I went up and I gave my — you know, Where were you born? I said, Selma, Alabama. And when I sat down, Bernice said, "Were you really born in Selma?" So there we are. That was a great moment in my life, really, to be there with them. So, there was that. There was the anti-intervention in Central America actions that were happening, so I got arrested with a whole bunch of

other people in front of the State Department, and that was around Nicaragua. So, I mean, there was this stuff that was going on, but again, we were part of these national campaigns against the federal government.

And by that time, Helen Langa and Eleanor Holland had moved to D.C. They were living in D.C. and so they were part of my social circle. They were my old *Feminary* folks. And Aida and Raymina were also in Washington, so four of the old *Feminary* people were in Washington with me. And so there were five of us. And we were doing — not so much Aida and Raymina, they were doing their — but they were doing organizing. They were doing organizing in the women of color community.

We put on a big benefit, a bunch of us, and Audre keynoted it. What was it for? God, I can't even remember. It was at, I think, St. Stephen's. Anyway, it was a huge, huge benefit for some political thing, and they were part of all that organizing. So, there was this nucleus and we were overlapping some in terms of the organizing, but it was all around national issues. And sometimes we were arrested together. Helen and Eleanor were very heavy into doing anti-interventionist work. Eleanor was working and doing graphics or something over in Adams Morgan. They had a whole big mural up in the window of their print shop around anti-intervention stuff.

Anyway, we were all there. When the U.S. invaded Grenada, I was at dinner that night with Joan and some other friends. I don't remember exactly who was there. And we said, We should do something. We should do something. We were just, Oh god, you know. Grenada, like the size of — smaller than Washington, D.C. And so, we started this political action group, this lesbian political action group, that Helen and Eleanor were part of, and I was part of, Joan was part of, Urvashi Vaid was part of. Ruth Eisenberg, who was working for the federal government at the time and was rather cautious about her lesbian identity but now is like, Whitman-Walker clinic's lawyer. And I don't know, a bunch of other people, right?

And we started this group, and we called ourselves LIPS because — I don't know, it was like a lesbian name. And people would say, What does it stand for? And we'd say, It stands for itself. Eleanor used to say, "It's like Coca-Cola. It just stands for itself." But then, every time we did a different press release, we'd make up some other acronym, you know. I mean, we were — I don't know. We had a lot of fun, and we were very serious about it, too. So, our idea was to have a lesbian group that dealt with these issues of imperialism and racism and the U.S. aggression, and that's what we did.

So, we didn't do just lesbian actions. We picketed the Department of Justice around the Greensboro decisions. And I spoke about that, that the Klansmen who killed the Communists in Greensboro were acquitted in the North Carolina courts. Just, you know, were acquitted: It's OK, you can shoot Communists in the street. That's fine. And then a civil rights organization brought that case forward as a violation of civil

30:00

rights, which of course is very common in the South, as you know. African American people who were organizers would get killed. They'd [the murderers] get acquitted. And then the federal government would sue for violation of civil rights. So that's what was going on, although it wasn't the federal government suing. It was the civil rights organization. And the federal government wasn't doing anything, so we were picketing around that.

And we had literature about, what does this have to do with being lesbian? I mean, everything that we wrote tied these issues with lesbian oppression and to some extent gay, but it was really very lesbian focused, because I was not into working with men at that time. None of us were. Urvashi, who'd come out of GCN, pushed us, you know, "Really, they're not so bad. You should be working with the boys," you know. And that was her terminology, not mine. And I just wasn't there. I just wasn't there at the time. I really just wanted to work with women.

And we picketed the Meese [Commission] Report hearings when Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon testified for Meese, starting in process a really grisly bunch of stuff around pornography. And just to talk about a nadir of feminism, feminist theory, that was one of them. But we were on the outside with our literature, saying this is not a feminist or a lesbian perspective on this. We just did a whole bunch of stuff like that, you know.

We dressed up as Ladies Against Women and went to the anti-*Roe v. Wade* right-wing march that's held every year in Washington. There are tens of thousands of people. And what was really sad, or funny, was that the NOW people were there and they thought we were the opposition, although we were holding signs that said things like, Sperm are People, Too. I mean, we were such a spoof. It showed the limits of satire.

ANDERSON: Well, [it] ends up feminists have a sense of humor, which sometimes we don't.

33:18

PRATT: But it didn't exactly work as a strategy. We had to go over and talk to the NOW people. It's like, you know, we're making fun of [the right-wingers.] And I'll never forget, on the way home from that action Urvashi, she got into a screaming match with one of the right-wingers. We had to pull her away. We were afraid they were about to come to blows. You know, there were only, like, 15 of us, and there were, like, 15,000 of them.

James Foreman was working in an office right at Maryland Avenue and First Street at the time, and he'd come out to look at the antiabortionists, and he saw us and he just started laughing and laughing and laughing. And he said, "Wait, wait, wait." And he made us take a picture of him with us. So somewhere, in all my LIPS stuff, it's us and James Foreman, us in our little pillbox hats and our polyester.

So, we had a wonderful time. It was a continuation, to some extent, of *Feminary*, even though nobody really talks about it. But Helen and

Eleanor and I, we were writing a lot of the literature. They were doing graphics, and it was, again, bringing that sort of intersection perspective, and like, not having queer issues, gender queer issues or sexuality issues exist in a limbo by themselves. So we did that. We did many actions. Somewhere, I have boxes and boxes of our fliers and leaflets. I have all that stuff. I don't even ever remember everything that we did.

The last action that we did was around the '86 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision at the Supreme Court. There was the decision and then, October 11, [1987] there was a huge, huge demonstration in front of the Supreme Court by gay and lesbian people. The Monday after the big national march on Washington. And the organizing for that day had gone on for a while. We in LIPS had decided that we would be an affinity group, and we opened it up to some other people who weren't regular LIPS members. So we were having meetings to prepare, to try to figure out what we wanted to do.

And I don't remember for how long we met before that day, but we were planning, and then the day before the action, everything sort of kicked into high gear. So the affinity groups, we were meeting — again, maybe at St. Stephen's, in Adams Morgan. We were meeting at one of the big, liberal churches, and I think it must have been St. Stephen's. And all the affinity groups were meeting. So there was the LIPS affinity group. And then, there were these lesbians who didn't have an affinity group who were wandering around trying to get hold of an affinity group. And we had agreed, we agreed in this sort of rush-like atmosphere, that Amber [Hollibaugh] could come in and Tacie Dejanikus, who was an editor at *Off Our Backs*. Now, Tacie and Amber were at opposite ends of the spectrum on the sex wars, and bitter, bitter. *Off Our Backs* had been bad, bad, bad around this stuff.

ANDERSON: And bad to Amber.

37:40

PRATT: And bad to Amber, in particular. But somehow, and I don't remember how this happened, but I think it was, you know, there we were, and here were these lesbians wandering around looking for an affinity group. And we knew Tacie and we knew Amber, and there they were, and some other people in the group who had also been at different places around this. So there we were. There were 13 of us, strangely enough. And I chaired our affinity group meeting for planning, I chaired. I don't know how I ended up chairing, but I chaired.

And part of the process of chairing that meeting, which went on for quite a long time, was that, without it coming out in any lengthy way, it was expressed by Amber and by Tacie that they had been bitter enemies. I mean, I don't know that they said it exactly like that, but that was the gist of it, and there we all were. And I don't know what I did. Boy, talk about wishing I had a video camera of, like, the whole interaction of this group of women, but I did something so that we didn't fall apart. I mean, we all did it. We all just — we just said, We want to do this together as lesbians. We just want to be able to hold this

together as lesbians. I mean, I facilitated, but it was the group consensus that this was very important that we not crack up over the past, for this demonstration. But I think it was important that I had not been part of the sex wars. I think it was very important. I was chairing and I was neutral in a sense, you know, neutral to what had been. And to some degree, some of the other people [were also neutral], but others had had positions. So, it was there in that group. We didn't fall apart. We did hang in with each other.

And Helen and Eleanor were in that group. It was kind of a strange moment, because we were far into our planning, we had almost come to the end, and Mab came by and wanted to join in and we were too far along to have her come in. That was kind of a sad moment. But we were almost to the end. We were about to send a delegate up to the — but you know how affinity groups work. You have to have consensus around what you're doing, and it was too late to start all over again. Because we were about to send a spokesperson up — I guess it was me and somebody else — to say to the whole group that we should be the first group arrested, because we knew that the media attention would be mostly on the issue of gay men and AIDS and we were afraid that lesbian issues would be buried. And so, we went forward and made an argument that in order to have a moment of attention on lesbian issues, we needed to be the first group arrested, because after that it was going to be about the police being afraid of the men with AIDS. I mean, it was awful, ugly stuff, and indeed, it did play out in the way that we thought it would. But the coverage was — I mean, we were the first group who went through. Elly was in that group. Jill Harris was in that group, who later went on to become a lawyer.

ANDERSON: Right. We've got one minute left, so just wrap up your thoughts.

PRATT: So, we went on. We went on to become the first group to be arrested, and we did get attention around lesbian issues because of that. It was a good moment. It was a good action, and it was the last LIPS action.

41:40

END DVD 6

DVD 7

PRATT:

So, why did LIPS end? Good question. A very good question. And it really does bring us to sort of the state of the movement at the time. We did that action — we had a discussion about how we would identify as a group, as an affinity group. Would we call ourselves a lesbian group, or would we call ourselves a lesbian feminist group? We discussed that and Amber was lesbian and Tacie was lesbian feminist, right, and there was, like, woman and, you know, gay, but those were not seriously under consideration. I'll never forget Elly saying, "I've gone to a whole lot of trouble to be a lesbian and that's how I want to be arrested." (laughs) And so, it was one of those moments where it really was about our sexual identity. It was about our sexual identity. It wasn't about our being women. It was about our being lesbians. And it was an important moment, and that's why the group held together. We did the action, and it was a heavy action.

And there were these undertones around butch-femme, again, not really talked about, but for instance, Jill Harris, who was a butch, when she was arrested, and I'm sure she writes about this in the account that I have, the arresting officer tried to make her kneel to him. Now, that didn't happen to me, right? So, you know, still, there were these undercurrents around gender expression that weren't surfaced yet but were very present. The action was around our being lesbians.

Now, it was a huge action. There were over 600 people arrested, over 600 people arrested. And it was a great action, a great action. And there were built-in limitations to a movement where the unity was around sexual identity, strictly sexual identity. So, in some ways, even as lesbian and gay and to some extent bisexual organizing was picking up, accelerating, under the pressure of AIDS and under these legal rulings, there were these built-in limitations. And we see them emerging now, over 15 years later, where the mainstream movement now has made so much — we've made so many gains. We've had the *Lawrence* [v. *Texas*, 2003] decision reverse *Bowers v. [Hardwick]*. And even Bush is saying gay unions are OK under the force of marriage being more horrific. We have the basis in the *Lawrence* decision for ultimately there will be an end to people losing custody of our children. I mean, it's still happening. It's going to take ten, 15 years to really enforce it, but it will ultimately end.

And we see mainstream gay groups emerging who are right wing. Well, I don't want to say right wing, that's not correct, but to the right within the lesbian, gay, and bi- movement. We have the Log Cabin Republicans. We have a group forming to fight Don't ask, Don't tell [in the military] because — and their reasoning, what is their reasoning? The country can't afford to lose the talents and skills of gay and lesbian people in the war on terrorism. It's a rationale for gay rights. So, all of this was embryonic and has emerged, as does happen in movements — as they widen, these currents become clear. They were all there, but they become clear — left, middle, and right.

3:38

And I think, in some ways, that's why LIPS ceased. In other words, we had taken it — you know, we had worked on this multifaceted approach. We had done this last action as lesbians. We had seen how hard it was to do organizing as a zap group. You know, we would do these pickets but there would only be four or five of us. You know, it was very hard to generate any impact, any real political impact. The biggest impact we had had was within an issue that was not multidimensional. So what we were going to do? We didn't talk about it. We didn't talk about it. We didn't discuss it. We just didn't go on. You know, it's interesting, I don't remember our actually meeting to say, We're not going to do this anymore. It's just that the people inside the group began to, also, as the movement picked up steam, the people inside the group picked up steam, too. So Urvashi, she went off on her trajectory, and Ruth went off on hers, and I went off on mine, you know, we were all picking up steam, so we became more involved nationally and less locally. Some of the people who were in the group did stay on to do more local things, but we didn't stay together as a group.

And I, um, you know, I was writing. I had generated a book of poetry. I had done this work with — *We Say We Love Each Other* had come out, and *Years In Struggle* had come out in '84, *We Say We Love Each Other* had come out in '85 as the result of the growth of the feminist presses, that was Spinsters, that had gone from Judith McDaniel and Maureen Brady who were in Vermont — Vermont? Where were they? New York. They were in upstate New York. [The press] had gone to the West Coast. Jean Swallow, Sherry Thomas, they were doing it, and they took on that book.

I began to travel, you know. I began to travel around. I had already done that with that little chapbook, *The Sound of One Fork*, which I produced when I was in *Feminary* with bartered labor and my children helping me put it together. And they helped collate and staple it and trim it, and they were very little. We did it in the Lollipop Power offices in Durham. So I had begun to travel. I had done a Southern tour in my Volkswagen with that little book. I had gone all over the South, all over the South. It was an amazing trip. But I was doing that, traveling, reading, speaking. I had begun to speak at universities as a lesbian, which was very early.

ANDERSON: Can you comment right there on what your relationship was like with your family at this point — your mother, your sons, your grandmother? You just mentioned that you had a hostile letter from your —

8:00

PRATT: Yeah, my grandmother was dead by then. I really didn't have a relationship with my grandmother that was verbal. There was a lot of silence in my family. I may have written about that. There's just silence, silence, silence. So, you know, when we talk about relationships now, we think of interacting and communicating. (laughs) It's not what was

going on in my family. You were in the same social space at the same time for holidays, and that was your relationship. That was what it was.

ANDERSON: So you were doing that? You were maintaining a connection with them?

PRATT: So this was '82, '83, '84, and the children were in their early teens.

ANDERSON: And what was that like, being so far from them, geographically? How did you see them?

PRATT: It was very hard. It was very hard. By that time, they were in Wisconsin. Their father had moved them from Kentucky to Wisconsin. Right about the time I went to Washington, they ended up in Wisconsin. It made it very hard, because I didn't — I had no money. I mean, I was very — I don't have a lot of money now. I'm out of work now, actually, but then I had even less. I was adjuncting. And I would get these gigs for \$500 or something, and I just didn't have any money. I couldn't just fly to see my children. So that actually the first time I saw them in Wisconsin, Joan and I drove. It must have been — gosh, see, I don't remember, was it after Ohio Women's NWSA and then we just kept driving, or was this a separate trip? I can't remember. But we drove to Wisconsin, and I saw my children there with Joan, which was — I have a lot of mixed feelings about how that went. And on the way, we stopped at a women's collective farm in Wisconsin. We stopped at — so Joan — we stopped in Ohio and Joan did a — well, I'm blurring all these trips together.

But in any case, it was hard for me to see them and so I talked to them a lot on the phone, and that was very difficult. I remember Ransom being very depressed. He must have been about 12 at the time. His father was really pressuring him around being a man, and just stuff. And, um, I remember, I did well. I think I must have done well. I don't remember feeling like I was doing well at it, but I think I must have done pretty well, because I remember him talking to me about being so depressed, you know, he wanted to kill himself. My 12-year-old son and he's in Wisconsin and you're in Washington and he's talking about being suicidal. What do you do?

So I just talked to him about how I felt depressed, too, often, and what I did about it and talked to him about how I'd taken karate and how that helped and how it helped to move around, and how, you know, getting out of the house, and walking was good, and could he do any kind of physical exercise? And actually, I sent him — for some reason, I had my ex-lover Star's weights. How did I have them? I sent them to him. I sent him the weight set. I don't know how that happened, but anyway, he got them and he started working out and then he started rowing, and it got him through. It got him through. You know, so it was kind of like that. It was hard, it was very hard. And Ben was just still very young. I don't even want to talk about it. It was very hard, very, very hard.

10:35

And um, you know, I did the thing that I think divorced fathers do, you know, typically, which is that you don't call as much as you should, because it's so painful. So, I know there are things now I wish I had done more of. I wish I had written more letters. I wish I had sent more cards. I wish I had called more. But I didn't. You know, I did the best I could.

I was drinking a lot, drinking a lot, at different times. My pattern was — and I can say this as a recovered person — was to drink, except then I would get in a new relationship and then I would be using the person and not drinking. So, there was the drinking when I was sort of alone, then I would stop and, you know, just have the person who might make me feel better. But the oppression around being a lesbian mother who has lost custody of her children — I drank a lot. I really did.

And of course, one of the great things that has developed in our lifetime around the lesbian-gay community is the recovery movement. I've seen it in the South, you know, going to music festivals in the South — like the first year there was a music festival in Georgia and the degree of drinking that was going on, and then coming back two or three years later and how changed it was, just breaking out of the isolation, having alternatives, having other ways of being with each other. Not being in so much pain, you know.

ANDERSON: Yeah, it definitely marks a generation. I mean, I don't think you're going to see that with my generation in the same — I hope not.

PRATT: I know, and it's so good, it's so good because it took such a toll on us all, such a toll.

14:20

ANDERSON: Now, you were talking with your kids about being an out lesbian at this time?

PRATT: Yes. I actually came out to them before I left North Carolina. And I've written about this but maybe it's not in any collection anywhere, so, I actually came out to them after that weekend at the beach that I spoke of earlier. Because Marvin let me have them, I figured that the worst danger was finally over. They were 11 and 12, about 11 and 12. So it had been about six years, and I figured the worst danger was over, because he let me have them with my lover. So, OK.

ANDERSON: Fair game.

PRATT: Fair game. And I had never talked to them before, because I was afraid they would go back to him and talk and that would endanger my seeing them, and I didn't want to tell them not to talk to their father about anything. That didn't seem right. I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to say, "Don't tell your father." It just wasn't right. You know, I wasn't going to mess them up that way. I mean, things were already hard enough for them.

So, we got back from the weekend. We were sitting on my steps in this little house that I had in Fayetteville, by myself, at that point. I was living by myself. And, uh (laughs), oh my gosh. We were sitting on the steps and I said, “I want to talk to you about something. You know, we were just with Cris, and I know you may be wondering, like, who is this person? So, I’m with her right now. I’m a lesbian. Do you know what a lesbian is? No?” I was talking to Ransom. Ben is playing tether ball. Or, he’s sitting there but he doesn’t really [want to talk, but I say,] you know — well, a lesbian is a woman who wants to be with other women, and not to be married to men but to be with other women. And gay men — there are men who want to be with men.

So, Ransom says to me, “Uh, lesbian. Was Jesus a lesbian?” It was this great moment. Great, great moment. And of course, now, I just read a review of something in the *Lambda Book Report* that was all about was Jesus homosexual or not. This whole scholarly book has come out about, were these homoerotic relationships with John and, you know, Ransom is, like, right on it. It’s like all those men. I don’t know who was talking to him about Jesus. Not me. And where did he get this? It’s sort of like my having this idea of the dykes in leather. It’s like Jesus and all these men hanging with each other and loving each other, it’s like, I don’t know. I said — I just started laughing. You know, it’s like, Gosh, honey, I don’t know. I know he loved these other men a lot. I don’t know. But he wasn’t a lesbian. He would’ve been a gay man in that case.

ANDERSON: Why did they think that they were with Marvin and not you, though? What were they told?

17:50

PRATT: Well, I told him at that time — I don’t know what they were told by Marvin — you know, I never said to him, “I don’t want you to just” — you know, it’s like, “I want you to be with me but Marvin wants you and he’s got you.” And I think I told them, even as young children, “And that’s what the courts are saying.” That that’s what the sheriff and — again, I said to them that afternoon, um, you know, you’re with Marvin because I’m a lesbian and the law says I can’t have you. That’s why. And maybe Ransom said, “Is the sheriff the law?” I said, “Yeah, that’s pretty much it, honey.”

ANDERSON: Especially in the South.

PRATT: Yeah, pretty much it. And Ben is, like, I’ve had enough of this. He’s playing tether ball. Um, then when I moved to Durham, I had this conversation with my Ransom. We were washing dishes. He was older, he was in his early, you know, he was pubescent. He was, like, getting hormones, and we were washing silverware, you know, he was saying, “Mom, you really need to clean your silverware” — he got his cleaning stuff from his father — and he says to me, I’m living on Clarendon

Street in Durham at the time, he says to me, “Mom, uh, I think I’m heterosexual.”

To me, this is the beauty of what we’ve done as a movement. And I say this when I speak. When people say, Well, what does it mean? What is it that you did as a movement? I say, “The lesbian-gay- bi movement, the great gift to the world is that we made it possible to talk about sexuality openly and we gave that to everybody, everybody, whether they understand that or not, we gave that to everybody.” And I saw it with my own child, who’s standing there at 13, saying to me, “Mom, I think I’m heterosexual.” And I say to him — so this was, like, 1981, right? — I say to him, “Well, honey, why do you think that?” He says, “Well, I like girls the best. I really like girls.” And I say — well, what can I say? “I really understand that. I understand that feeling. So, good, fine.” So, I saw it with my own child, who was able to have a conversation with me, consciously claiming his sexuality at 13 in a way that I couldn’t do until I was 28 years old — 28, 29, 30, you know. It’s a big deal, big deal.

And um, I think of that, you know. I’m over the worst of thinking I did something awful to them because it was so painful. It was terribly painful and it scarred us, but I’ve seen that it also gave them certain things that they wouldn’t have gotten otherwise. And it was just, again, the result of oppression that we had to go through it. It wasn’t that I did something to them. It was that we lived under terrible pressure, and I broke through that, and then they got something from it.

And it was at a cost. I mean, another conversation I had with Ransom — I love Ransom, Ransom keeps his counsel until he says something right on the money, you know, right on the mark. He’s very, very taciturn in a lot of ways and then, bam, you know. So, I remember another conversation I had with him. I was in Washington at the time. We were on the phone. A lot of this happened on the phone. A lot of these conversations were on the phone, and he had just seen some June movie, you know, about lesbians and their children, right, probably that early thing that — oh god, I can’t remember anybody’s name — *In the Best Interests of the Children*.

So we started talking about our experience, and I said to him, “So, what do you think the impact was on you of my being a lesbian? How was that for you?” And he said, “I don’t think that what happened to me, the impact was because you were a lesbian.” He says, “It was because you weren’t there. You weren’t there.” And again, in a nutshell. He’s not saying, Your sexuality did something to me. It was that you were kept from me. And he spoke some of what kinds of things about his personality he thought got shaped by my not being there for him as a small child.

So, both of my children have a degree of self-consciousness around — a high degree of self-consciousness, I would say — around what that journey was like. Once we were able to start talking about it, which I was able to do when they were about 11 and 12, with that conversation.

22:17

My experience of them as they have gone through various stages of adulthood has been variable and I don't really want to talk about that.

I have tried to write about, almost like a sequel to *Crime Against Nature*, some of the later stages, and then becoming a grandmother, and it's being very hard to do, because it becomes more complicated when it's not about just the direct experience of the oppression on us as mother and child. It's the rest of our lives embedded in a system that's still very homophobic and anti-woman and they are men, white men, who are not living my life, and so they don't — there are just areas where they don't know, they don't experience, they don't have an understanding. And that has caused, at different moments, some difficulties that we talk about. But I have a very different feeling about writing about those. I don't want to really write about those kinds of moments with them. I don't. I feel like that relationship between us is still ongoing and will be ongoing, hopefully, for a long time, until I die. And I don't really want to scrutinize it in the same kind of way.

So I'm a little stymied about how to write about our later lives, about certain things around my youngest son's life and his life with his partner, which is extremely interesting and complicated. A small part of it which is public knowledge is that the woman he is with now and married to now, he is her first male relationship. She was a lesbian until she got together with Ben. They were at Duke together, a hot bed of gender/queer theory, and when they got together — whoa, the fur flew in the department, because even though they were living out this gender flexibility, it was upsetting.

ANDERSON: Even though he was your son? That probably helped a little. Probably gave him some credentials.

26:09

PRATT: It didn't really help in their social circles. It didn't. It was interesting. And I understand, because they were going from a certain kind of queerness, both of them, although Ben was not queer-identified [to my knowledge.] You know, Ben was somebody who always hung out with the girls. I would call him when he was living in Massachusetts — he moved to Massachusetts with his father when he was at the end of high school — I would call him and he would say, "Gotta run. We're all going to Northampton." Who is we? Like, five young women and Ben would be in the car running the roads in the Pioneer Valley, you know. So he had his own sort of gender queerness around being with women and stuff like that.

So, anyway, I'm a little stymied right now about how to come to sort of the next stage of writing about these things. I've written about half of a book that I thought about calling — I've got it written down — the working title is *The End of Civilization As We Know It*, about the second half of all this. Based on what my mother said to me when I told her I was leaving my husband. She said, "If you leave Marvin, if marriage is over, that's the end of civilization as we have known it." I'm like, right.

ANDERSON: See ya.

PRATT: And we're living it. I mean, we're living it in my family. But yet, not. Ransom is married, expecting the first child in June. Ben is married to Katie, they have two children. So, that sort of brings us up to date with the children. I think that's –

ANDERSON: OK. Could you just reflect for a minute, then, on how you mothered and grandmothered in a way that's similar to or different from your family experience. Do you find yourself being your mother?

PRATT: I have very consciously tried to break with my mother's patterns. I've been very, very conscious about that. I think that her pattern was withholding and cold, and um, I think she was from a lineage of women who learned to be that way to protect themselves, and who were terribly oppressed and unable to claim their selves and take pleasure and give pleasure. And I think that when I came out as a lesbian, I said no to that lineage. I claimed pleasure, you know, in the way that Audre writes about it. The yes, which is not just about the erotics of the yes, but about a whole vision of how the world might be including a socialist vision which she talks about, of like, work that can be a yes and not alienated.

So I rejected that. And then, I do think that that affected how I parented them, where I felt like I gave them physical affection. I gave them love. I tried to talk to them in a way that I was never talked with. I think I did still have a tremendous amount of anxiety, and that a lot of that I passed along to them, my nervous grandmother Minnie Bruce, you know, and that acculturation in the family toward anxiety. But I think I changed a lot.

I remember when the first grandchild was born, Simon Bruce, Simon Bruce Kent. They named him after me and after his mother, Katie Kent, right? And I remember when they called and said that he'd been born, and I was very upset, because — it was a crisis for me. Here's another child. Will I lose this child, too, if I get close to the child? It was a very direct crisis for me. And I wasn't going to go see the child. And Leslie, Leslie is very wonderful about living. Leslie really knows how to live, and Leslie said, "You feel like you're going to lose this child? Do you think Marvin's going to get this child? We just need to go. Just got to go. We're going to go. We're going to go see this child." And we went in the car, we drove up so that I saw Simon about eight hours after he was born. And I remember on the way, I just got terribly, terribly nauseated. And I said to Leslie, "Oh, this is my mother. This is my mother who wouldn't let herself have things, and I am trying to let myself have this experience."

And that is still a struggle for me. It's still an ongoing struggle. To have connection and a relationship with my children, especially, and my grandchildren, after having gone through this trauma of losing them, where I, you know, part of how I lived through it was by limiting what I could expect to have with them. And I've had, of course, so much more

30:00

than I thought I would have. I really have. And I fought for that. I fought, fought, fought for that with them. And yet, you know, there is this part where I fear that it will be gone. And it's not an unreal fear, because we live in a homophobic world. So at what point will I be denied on some level. And that does happen now and again. And it's very painful. So, but, I'm really continuing to work on that.

I have a new plan with Simon. He's in kindergarten now. So I write him. I write him a letter every week. I write to him every week, and it's part of, like, well, I didn't write the children. OK, you got a grandchild, you know, I can do it again.

But it is, it is an interesting experience to be someone who came out of women's liberation with our vision of a different world and really living in that space for a few years of, like, we can remake it, we can redo it. And to be living in the present where it isn't remade. It really isn't redone. I have two children and they have little nuclear families. They're living very conventional lives. And they're having children, and suddenly I have a relationship with these other human beings that's entirely arbitrary, you know, based on that model. And then, it's like, who am I to these children, who really know nothing of everything that we've been talking about, you know. They're living in this rather protected little bubble. You know, who am I?

But then, they come to see us and I'm trying to look on the refrigerator to see — in a minute, I'll go and get a picture of Simon when he came here the last time, and you'll see. He goes right to my jewelry, and I have a beautiful picture of him in a hat, all cross-dressed with jewels, and so then I think, well, they come here and they're with me and Leslie and they do see that there is another way, and that is more than I had, you know. And they're seeing it from a very early age, very early age.

33:50

ANDERSON: Very normalized to them.

PRATT: And of course, what they're going through with their own parents is different than what I went through. Their parents have been changed by my life, by the movement. You know, their parents are doing things differently than my life with Marvin even. So, as I said earlier, the way things changed is very circuitous — loops and folds.

And I've also learned — and I knew this when I made the decision to live as a lesbian, and I don't say this in a cynical or a disparaging way — but my hope is not in my children. I love my children and I fought very hard to have a meaningful, honest, significant loving relationship with them, but I don't think the world is going to change because of what I put into my children. And it's not what I have seen of how the world changes. The world changes because we build mass movements, and millions of people are engaged, and that's how things change. And then our children reap the benefit of that. But it's not going to happen because of something they specifically do or something I specifically do with them, you know.

So, I'm trying to figure it out, having these relationships with these grandchildren. With each one of them, I've gone and I've been the grandmother. I went up after Simon and I stayed for a couple of weeks, taking care of Ben and Katie, mostly. You know, they moved the week that she gave birth. I packed them up, I helped them move, I cleaned the house, I changed the diapers and took care of the baby. And then when Ruth was born, I went up for about five days, it was less necessary.

ANDERSON: And what's Leslie's relationship to those children?

PRATT: She's Grampy, you know, one of the grandparents. One of the grandparents. And I think that's all I'll say, because she has many interesting things to say about that relationship, but those are her insights to share, but they certainly know her as a grandparent, you know. And Ben relates to Leslie as a parent, you know, as a parent.

ANDERSON: Yes. I'm going to stop the tape.

37:47

END DVD 7

DVD 8

PRATT: OK. So, forming my identity as a writer, which, obviously, [also was happening while] I was organizing in D.C., but getting a more national perspective in terms of organizing, not just in terms of lesbian feminism and cultural work, so all that was happening around about the same way, about the same time. I was writing, I produced *We Say We Love Each Other*, which was really some of the poems I had written in North Carolina, and then I finished them in D.C., and a lot of them were love poems to Joan. The *Yours in Struggle* collection came out. Then as a result of being involved in the National Women in Print loose confederation or network, I guess you might want to call it, we had the second Women in Print conference in D.C. Mary Farmer at Lammas Bookstore was involved in organizing that along with a lot of other people. And actually, that was right before I moved up to D.C., so that happened right before I moved to D.C. Because the *Feminary* collective went to that as a collective, and it was full of high drama because all of the multiple lovers were there at one time. I was there with Cris, I was there with Joan, Joan's other lover was there, there were others, and there was this high-drama moment. I don't think I've ever talked about this anywhere, where it appeared for a few hours that my lover Cris was going to get together with Joan's lover. That was quite a something. And I was just, like, that's it. No, I'm not going to do that. It was interesting, I mean, in terms of non-monogamy.

ANDERSON: Right. You finally had a boundary.

PRATT: It's like the chain, or this sort of long spectrum, was doable, but to box it, to close it — couldn't deal with it. I just, I thought, we'll implode. I think I was right. So I was like, This is it. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to break up with somebody. I don't know who it's going to be. (laughs) And in fact, there was — Joan had a van at the time. She traveled all over in this van doing her work, and she and I were in the back of the van having a scene, and the *Feminary* collective was waiting in a car for us to finish having this scene, for us to go back to North Carolina. Oh god. That just says it all about the kinds of drama that we've been through. I mean, I can laugh about it now. Because I had to leave the scene and get in the car next to my other lover to go back to North Carolina.

ANDERSON: No wonder everybody drank a lot.

3:08

PRATT: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. But of course, it says something about how do you set in place these new ways of being. It takes a lot, a lot of *tsarros* to do that. So, anyway, as the result of being part of this, sort of, network around Women in Print, the magazines, the bookstores, the everything, Rachel Guido DeVries manned a program in Syracuse, New York, called the Community Writing Program, and she invited writers

up for six months at a time to teach classes as part of this program. She got a grant to do this, and she asked me to come and be one of those writers and then the grant funding fell through, and it didn't happen for several years.

But it was a big moment in my life. It was, like, Oh, I'm a writer. And that was a difficult definition for me to come to, in part because of my politics, because I was so committed to revolution, really. I thought, everything needs to be different, and that meant organizing, and writing was couched and presented as an individual activity. So, to identify in that way was difficult, and particularly to identify as a poet, because that was even more esoterically presented.

However, and — talk about not having access to traditions, I had no access to these traditions. This lineage of activist poets that was very real in the U.S. and the rest of the world — I didn't know anything about that. I had gotten a glimmer of it through learning more about African American literature, so I was beginning to understand that there were these lineages of antiracist white women, activist poets, and I was forging, slowly forging an identity for myself, as an activist writer.

And it was hard to think about just taking time to write. I've never, for instance, been to a writer's colony. Never. I've never applied to a writer's colony, and for a long time, I didn't apply because I thought, What, you go and you isolate yourself somewhere in rural New York and you write? Like, that's not how I've learned to write. That's not how I've learned to write. So, I've just never done that, and to be just in the circle of people who are talking only about writing? It just seems so artificially unproductive to me.

So, it was very meaningful when Rachel, out of this more activist context, said, "Oh, I want you to come and be this writer in the community." Ah, OK. That I can understand. That, I can relate to. Part of the community. Understanding that I knew a lot about helping people break through to their truths, who might not have had access to that, because of class reasons, especially. So, in '80 — gosh, so it must have been right after '87, she got funding again, and I went away in '87, '88, I guess, around that time, to Syracuse, and I spent six months living in Kate Clinton's apartment in Casanovia that she — she'd come from upstate New York, and so she had an apartment in Casanovia that she had from that time, that she had hung onto because she was still figuring out that she could make it as a national touring person, right? And she wanted to sublet this apartment, so I lived in her apartment in Casanovia, and I wrote most of *Crime Against Nature* in that apartment, in her little corner at her writing desk. Ah, that was a great, it was hard, but it was a great six months. And taught in the community. Gave these classes.

Came home, finished it, sent it off to Nancy and eventually it came out. Won the Lamont, and that was an interesting moment of, again, everyone — I'll never forget, Nancy called me and said, "You've won the Lamont." It's, like, what? At the Academy of American Poets as an out lesbian. I mean, Marilyn Hacker had won it, but not for something

that had lesbian content, so it really was, again, this sort of breakthrough moment. Oh, it was the trajectory of the '80s around us breaking through into the mainstream. It was one of those moments. And I called Elly and said, "I've won the Lamont." There was just dead silence, dead silence on the other end of the line. I mean, nobody could believe it. Like, what happened? And of course, all of our conversations were around, How did this happen? How is this possible? Very interesting, because we were trying to calculate the impact of the movement on the cultural arena. And of course, it was about — I mean, I said to Barbara, "The movement made it happen." And Barbara said, "Don't underestimate your skills as a writer." But, the two are so intertwined, you can't separate them out, right? It's impossible to separate them out.

And I went and I got the award at the Guggenheim, and gave this talk, and I've written about it and Adrienne [Rich] has written about that evening, so I don't want to go into it in detail, but it was a very interesting moment, because it was about, the movement meets the cultural establishment. It couldn't have been any sharper, and the fact that the movement was meeting the cultural establishment was represented by who was in the audience that night. Adrienne was there, Nancy Bereano was there, Marilyn Hacker was there, Judith McDaniel was there, my children were there, you know, I mean, it was a very interesting moment. I can't even remember everybody who was there, but the lesbian feminist cultural establishment was there, you know.

And right before I went in, Adrienne said, "What are you going to read?" I said, "Well, I'm going to read some of the title poem." And she said, "Take longer. The men always take longer." And so, I read for a really long time. And they freaked out, because I was taking so much time and they passed me these notes, trying to make me stop, and I wouldn't. And the people in the audience thought they were going to, like, actually interrupt me and people began to hiss. And it was really quite a scene, quite a scene.

And Richard — oh god, not Richard Howard, I'm suppressing his name now, the great gay writer — [James] Merrill was there and he was very charming to me before, somewhat charming to me before the ceremony and afterwards, he said to someone, "What an opportunist she is." And I thought, This is being opportunist? I've probably, I'm sure, you know, that evening closed a lot of things down to me for a long time. I don't even know what. I thought, standing up here and speaking politically as a lesbian, believe me, James Merrill, is not being an opportunist. It's really saying goodbye to a lot of opportunities, including any grant from the Merrill-Ingram Foundation for the rest of my life, probably. So, um, so that happened. That was at the end of the '80s. I was doing speeches everywhere and those speeches, I collected — I rewrote and collected in *Rebellion*, and that came out, also, at the beginning of the '90s.

So, I was forming this identity, a strong identity as a writer, as well as someone who was an activist. The two were really coming together. I was in a trajectory with the movement around our sort of having

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national impact. And I was in this relationship with Joan that was extremely difficult — Joan Biren, or JEB. And again, I don't want to say too much about the particulars of it. Some of that can be seen in some of the short pieces from *S/He*, but I can say two things, I think, ethically. One is that all along, the relationship was troubled by the fact that I was not in recovery, either around drinking or around being the child who had come out of an alcoholic family. So there were dynamics in the relationship that I contributed to that I didn't understand were there and that I couldn't stop, I didn't know how to stop. And so, toward the end of that relationship, I got into 12-step recovery programs, specifically into ACOA [Adult Children of Alcoholics].

And I just want to stop a minute here and say to any researcher who might be using this tape, that the policy of the — I'm talking about recovery because this is a personal history for the archives — but the policy of the program is anonymity at the level of press and media, and so I would like researchers to honor that. And if they're going to write about this, just say that I, you know, was in recovery around being, or took steps to remedy my childhood patterns around being a child of an alcoholic family. That's the principle of the program. And I would like researchers to honor that.

Anyway, I started that [process.] I gained a lot from it — really, really helpful. And, uh, right about the same time, emerging in the D.C. community was a more complex conversation around butch and femme. And it was a spinoff of all the turmoil that had gone around Barnard and around the sex wars. How do we talk about these things. What even are we talking about? You know, the Carole Vance anthology had come out —

ANDERSON: Uh-hm. Probably one of Joan Nestle's books.

PRATT: No.

ANDERSON: Not yet?

PRATT: Well, yes. Right about that time, but there's another one there. There are two: *Pleasure and Danger*, and then there's the other one —

ANDERSON: *Passion and Power*?

PRATT: I can't remember. Anyway, and —

16:00

ANDERSON: Ann Snitow?

PRATT: Right. Ann Snitow. That anthology had come out. So that was this accumulation of conversation, you know, that was going on that I had seen, read, and been a part of. And there was a group [femme] meeting — I was not part of it — to talk about butch-femme stuff. I think Joan might have been part of it, I'm not sure about that. I can't quite

remember. And as part of that, but not locally, but rather nationally, that dialogue was developing, Leslie came to D.C. to speak. She came because it was happening on a national level, and she was part of that, and she has a whole story about a big forum that was held in New York where she spoke as a transgender lesbian, and it was one of those moments where things broke through.

So, she came to D.C. There was a Workers World branch in D.C. They sponsored it. It was a slideshow that she had been developing for many years that was the germ of the book that later became *Transgender Warriors*. I went because everybody in my group, social circle, lesbian social circle, was going because it was about these gender issues that people were talking about. You know, this group that was talking about butch-femme stuff — they were talking about dildos. They were talking about sex toys. You know, there was open conversation going on about fucking and at a level that had not been there ever before. And so they were all going.

And what was very interesting about it was this was the lesbian feminist cultural establishment, so to speak. I mean, Nancy Polikoff, who now is, like, the — I don't know — international authority on lesbian custody cases, right? She's a lawyer at AU. It was before she was a mother. There was a maybe-baby group also in D.C. and so a lot of the women in that group became mothers and some of the women from that group overlapped with this discussion as well. And so, they were all there.

By that point in time, Joan had broken up with me. She had moved out and about five months later, she broke up with me. We were living in a house on Franklin Street in D.C., in the Northeast part of D.C., and she had left. It was very difficult, but now, of course, I'm glad she left, but it was very hard at the time. And she had broken up with me and she was going to be at this — I assumed that she'd be at this gathering because everybody was there. I went with somebody that I was not dating, but was sort of hanging out with, Michelle Zavos, at the time, who was another lesbian lawyer who[se] lover had broken up with her and we were sort of going to things together a little bit. And I didn't want to talk to Joan. I really didn't want to talk to her. And she was in the audience, kind of like (gestures "hi"), and I was, like, I don't want to talk to you.

So I was sitting up in the back area of the Marie Reed Center. It's graduated seating, and Leslie was giving her slideshow. But actually, right beforehand, I had met her. Somebody asked me to show her the way to the auditorium. So, it's very interesting. I remember meeting her, very handsome, great shirt. I don't think she had a tie on. No, I don't think she had a tie on. I remember that first moment where I saw her as more slight and smaller than I ever, ever remember again feeling that she was. It was an interesting moment. I remember seeing her and perceiving her as a slight butch lesbian. Thin, but slight, I think might be the word. And I've never again seen her that way. Very, very interesting, having to do with the power of the self.

20:00

But, you know, we had this meaningless, sort of, you know, how to get to the auditorium — we have a routine we do around this, you know, meeting each other. She has her side of it and I have my side of it and we tell it as a duet, and we enjoy that. But she read the “Letter to a ’50s Fem” at that talk before she did the slideshow. And I had already read it in the anthology, so the anthology was out. And what was important about that moment with her reading it was that when I had read it on the page — I didn’t understand that that was my story until I heard her reading it as a butch speaking it.

So she read this story and as she read it, I visualized involuntarily, just visualized, these moments in my life that corresponded to the moments in this story. Like I remember my lover Cris after she was raped and how I went and took her bloody clothes and washed them and mended them. I’ve even written a poem about it. And I knew that the reason Cris was raped was because she was a butch lesbian. I knew all this stuff, but I hadn’t put it in a larger context of the history of lesbians and butches and the bars and the women’s movement. I just hadn’t put it — I hadn’t seen my life as part of this narrative, even though I was living it, exactly living it. And yet, I listened to her and I saw my own life [as a femme.] I mean, I saw these moments in my own life. They were there. They corresponded.

So I left. I got out of there. I didn’t want to talk to Joan. And Michelle and I went to a party and before we went into the party, we had this long discussion about what we’d just heard, because Leslie wasn’t talking just about butch and femme, of course. She was trying to explain transgender to us, using these pictures and putting [them] into a context of historical materialism, right, and saying, it’s not just about passing for economic reasons, it’s more complicated than that. You know, she was really lifting us to the next level of theoretical understanding.

24:00

And I began to understand that night that — I had already sort of begun to understand it, but I really began to understand that night, that our theoretical tools had been limited. Now, when I say I had sort of begun to understand it — because this rumbling, this development was happening, I had actually already started writing these pieces for *S/He* before that evening. I had already begun them.

And I had had this brief — well, not brief, well, yes, brief — but I was in the middle of having an affair with a lesbian philosopher (laughs), Marilyn Frye. I was having — this is definitely not known anywhere. I was having this summer affair with Marilyn Frye. And it is sort of interesting because the two paths couldn’t be any more sort of starkly evident than an affair with someone who had been a lesbian separatist, essentially, and had tried to box her way out of that, not very successfully but had attempted to — and Leslie, you know. I mean, there were my two paths. One was a continuation, really, of my life with Joan, ideologically, right, and another was going back to — and I say back in a good way — forward to, back to, you know, this expansion into the world, taking sexuality issues, gender issues, and bringing them

back into the larger movement, into struggles against class oppression and racism and everything. That was Leslie.

So, I was having this affair with Marilyn, very intense little affair, and um, so I had started writing these pieces. And I went to this party with Michelle. Beforehand, we sat in the car and we talked about these concepts, and about butch and femme, and Michelle identified as a butch and her ex-partner had been a femme, and she started talking about what it meant to her as a butch to be in a relationship with a femme. It was very beautiful and very moving, about — it was so *not* about domination. It was so not about any of these ideas that people have about it. It was about where she could go, being herself with someone who was being themselves as a femme. You know, it was about the place that you could go in that sort of dynamic interaction, and how thrilling that was. And so that was a wonderful moment. I wasn't — you know, Michelle was not anyone I had thought of at all as being a possible partner. So it was maybe even more meaningful to hear it from her, you know, just an objective reporting from the butch side of things, of what it might be like. And not what I had been hearing from Joan.

ANDERSON: Or Marilyn.

28:43

PRATT:

At all. Or Marilyn, at all, both of whom were very conflicted about my femininity and about my feminism, and about themselves, you know, about their own stuff. Or at least, that's how I experienced it. So it was a house party. It was a D.C. house party. African American women, white women, all lesbians — raunchy, raunchy, raunchy. You know, great music and porn movies on downstairs, lesbian porn movies, and women looking and saying, How come all these women have long fingernails? That is not right. And us doing — and I've written about this — doing this circle thing where all the femmes will get in a circle and put a butch in the middle and say, OK, how butch is she? and rank them, and us saying a seven, and the butch saying, "No way, I'm a ten. I do not accept a seven."

And that was the moment we were breaking through to talking openly, socially, about our sexual and gender selves. And a lot of that, like we've said, you know, came out of the bars again, these gatherings. These are not — even in the early '90s, it was not like we were women who didn't go to the bars or hadn't come out of the bars, you know. Mostly, these were women in their 30s and 40s. And so, we were bringing forward what we knew of ourselves and we were being able to articulate it. And it was great. It was great.

And I stayed at the party till, like, four in the morning — totally untypical of me — went home, went to sleep, got up, went upstairs to where my office was in this house, and I had a message from Leslie on the phone, on my message machine. And I listened to it, and I just started shaking, really, and uh, I knew it was a very important message, and I actually wrote it down in my journal, word for word, and marked it for inflection, so I wouldn't forget how it sounded. I wasn't at the

point where I understood I should just save the tape. I learned that later, you know, I regret that, but I have it written down. And after I listened to it several times, I just started crying and I cried for about two or three hours.

32:00

And why did it have that impact on me? For the first time in my life, I had someone who was my sexual desire. Even though I wasn't thinking of Leslie as a potential partner at all, not in the slightest, but I knew from the night before that she stood in that place where others had stood. So the first time [I heard] someone who stood in that place in relation to me as a butch lesbian speak to me with incredible respect and recognition of who I was, and none of my partners had ever been able to do that. They had never recognized me. They had never consciously verbally articulated, I know who you are. I respect you. I love you. I mean, she didn't say, I love you. She talked about how much it meant to her that a femme from the old days was in the audience and how shaken she was by that and how the way I reacted to her reading the "Letter to a 50s Femme" that she didn't know if I had seen that she was reading it to me. She could see that I was responding as one who understood. So, she had already felt that recognition from me and she was giving it back to me in a completely respectful way. There was nothing sexual about this message. Nothing. She didn't even leave her phone number. And later, I found out that that was deliberate, because she didn't want to seem to be coming on any kind of smarmy kind of way.

ANDERSON: She just needed to share that.

34:00

PRATT: She just needed to just say, "I saw you. I know you." And I think it was important to her that it was in that context of the lesbian cultural feminist that I was there and I was connecting to her. Because that was the movement that she'd been closed out of. When we talk about the people who have been shut out of women's liberation, Leslie was it, even though she never wanted to take herself out of it, you know, and she has been completely committed to women's liberation at every step. Every step, and yet it was closed to her, you know. There are many things she can say about how that was for her.

So, the fact that I was there and I was connecting to her as part of that milieu was really meaningful to her. We knew each other on a level that had been denied to us before. And by knowing, I don't mean just about butch and femme, it was really about the whole spectrum of woman, of person in struggle, you know, of sexuality and desire, of gender expression. We knew each other. And I'd never had that before from anyone. Never. To be given that. You can't achieve that alone. To fully come into yourself, you have to, at some point, have the world recognize that. You can't hold — you know, you just can't do it by yourself. That's why we have a movement.

But she gave it to me on a personal level, and of course, as the result of all these movements. And as we said, we talked about this, actually some years back, when a German film crew came to interview us here,

from the German gay and lesbian movement, and they asked us to describe that moment, and we said, in that kind of duet that we do, that it was like having been stranded in a strange land for your whole life, not having seen anybody from home, and suddenly, someone that you've never seen before comes and you see them, and you know each other. You know each other from this really deep, old place of longing. And that's what happened. That's what happened for us.

I cried for three hours. I thought, What is happening to me? I did. I just thought, What is happening to me? What is happening to me? I didn't understand it. I didn't understand it. Of course, then the years since have been the understanding of it. And the writing *S/He* has been the understanding of it, of going back through my life, of understanding transgender oppression, of understanding why I as someone who is not transgender could be so deeply connected to that struggle, out of my place in women's liberation. Out of the place of someone who felt how deeply oppressed I was as a lesbian woman, and what transgender liberation can offer me and all of us. So years, sort of, out of that moment, I immediately wrote to Leslie. Well, I didn't immediately. I got her address from the organizer and I wrote to her and I said, "Thank you so much for your message and I just want to explain something, which is that I'm not a femme from the old days, because" blah-blah-blah, you know, women's, you know, lesbian feminist movement, you know. And, uh, I hand wrote it but I kept a copy.

ANDERSON: Oh, you're good.

38:45

PRATT: I hand wrote my letters to Marilyn and I have a copy of all them, too. Like I said to you, you know, I had enough in my life under segregation of the blotting out of history. It's not going to happen with my life, not going to happen with my life. So, she wrote back and she said — I can't remember exactly what I put in the letter, but maybe I talked [about] coming out in the bars in Fayetteville and — I don't know everything that I said in that letter, but over the course of our corresponding, she said to me — I must have told her about the raids on the bars in Fayetteville and how there was a back door and how we had to sign in and, you know, into the bar, because supposedly they gave the list of names to the police and so you always signed in as somebody else — I mean, there's all this stuff around the bars, and I must have told her all that. And so, she wrote back and said, "Honey, anybody who knows about the back door in the bars is a femme from the old days."

And of course, that was another moment in my life of where I thought, Oh, I have these overlapping worlds, and it was my understanding my own history. It was a moment where I understood my own history in the movement, that I came out of old gay life, I came out of lesbian feminism, I came out of women's liberation. I came out of all these places. They aren't separate places. They overlap. They overlapped in our lives. Different of us took those moments, those overlapping currents, we took them in different directions, you know,

different ways, but it's not that they were separate when we were doing them. We extended them in different ways.

So, I kept writing. I got to know her. We had a long correspondence, very old-fashioned. Talked on the phone. I well remember my first phone call with her, we laughed all the time. We just laughed and laughed. I don't even remember what we were laughing about. I just remember that we laughed a lot with each other. And that's pretty much how that's been. We've laughed a lot with each other. We have a great time together.

I do remember the first question she ever asked me, which was — maybe not the first question — the question I remember, which was, “How do the people in your town make a living?” Centreville. “How do people in your town make a living?” And I remember how excited I was. I don't mean intellectually. I just mean, ohhhh. I can talk about this. It was thrilling. Another one of those moments, like, Oh, she really wants to know about what it was like there, and I had a lot to say. And I didn't even know I had so much to say about how we made a living and how people made a living, all the different levels and ways and stuff around racism, and I just knew so much. And no one had cared. Nobody had cared, you know. A lot of what I did was deal with people around their anti-Southern stuff and their ignorance of the fighting history of the South and of — not just the struggle history but just the specifics. Like you know very well, people who think northern Virginia isn't the South, or people who don't understand the difference between North Carolina and South Carolina, or Alabama and Mississippi, or Kentucky and Tennessee, and how, you know, the economics of the region and the different ways that plays out — and I knew all this stuff, and I didn't know what I knew. But Leslie was a communist, and she knew how to get to it.

ANDERSON: How important it was, and how important it was in shaping who you were.

PRATT: Yes.

ANDERSON: OK. I'm going to put in a new tape.

END DVD 8

43:20

DVD 9

ANDERSON: That's a given.

PRATT: That's a given, you know, the writing part is a given. So, let's do the '90s.

ANDERSON: OK. So, this will be our last tape.

PRATT: This is our last tape and, I think, in an odd kind of way, it's less complicated, or maybe it just feels less complicated right now, but. So, I got to know Leslie, and I've talked some about this pattern I have around the personal and the political around my relationships, and what I was feeling at the time in Washington was the limits of national politics. And how I had developed an analysis around racism and around racism on the national scene, but I didn't really have an idea of how to fit that in with international struggle. Now, other people within women's liberation had gone on to do that, you know, in the NGOs, I mean Charlotte [Bunch], and even, uh, Mab to some extent, had, you know, traveled to Nicaragua, and — I hadn't done that. I had been much more within the lesbian feminist cultural circles, and I was feeling my limitation.

So, um, I got to know Leslie. I connected to her around gender issues first. I kept writing *S/He*. I had — you know, *Crime Against Nature* had come out. *Rebellion* had come out. I was writing *S/He* and, uh, we went through some time of a long-distance relationship but after about, almost, I don't know, it wasn't a year but it was maybe nine months or so, I understood I didn't want to do that. It was part of my recovery, of knowing that, because of the damage that had been done to me around my alcoholic family and around the stuff with my children, that I had protected myself by having distant relationships. You know, it was both a way to control pain and also to hopefully hold it off. And so, I thought, OK, I don't want to do that anymore. I'm ready to have a close-up relationship with somebody in a recovered way.

And Leslie was somebody who understood living sober, also, and that was very hopeful to me, that I was choosing someone who understood that. And so, we had a discussion about how we would do that. Would she move to D.C.? Would I move to New York? Would we move to a third city? We had a long extended discussion about how to do it, and then decided that I would come up to New York. And partly around the fact that she had a very, a very good network here. And as a transgender person, she needed a good network, and that moving to Washington without that network was very difficult thing to offer her. And then, there was also political work as well.

ANDERSON: And D.C. had kind of run its course for you, it sounds like.

3:50

PRATT: And D.C. had run its course for me, also, and I felt that. I felt like politically, I'm sort of at the end here, so, I moved up to New York. I moved to Jersey City. I moved to this apartment with her. We've been here for 12 years, on this corner, in this neighborhood, 147 Chestnut Street, the corner of Chestnut and Pavonia, right behind St. Joseph's Church and convent, right across the street from Salim and Mary's little deli. And I think the best way to characterize these 12 years, I think it would be truthful to say, that I have used these 12 years to explore politically and in my writing what it means to be an antiracist, anti-imperialist woman as part of women's liberation who still wants revolution, you know. What does that mean? It is where I started out, trying to find that path, and what I did when I moved up here is I would go to Workers World meetings with Leslie, you know, educationals, and read the paper.

ANDERSON: She was already involved with Workers World by then?

PRATT: Oh, she's been — yeah, she's been part of Workers World for many years and talks about that, since her young adulthood in Buffalo. I lived with her. I wrote. I had a job at an alternative graduate school called the Union Institute, where I no longer work because they fell into financial and organizational disarray. But I had that work. I was able to support myself doing that work. And I traveled. I continued to travel and speak. I explored gender issues. I finished writing *S/He*, and I attempted to educate myself as a Marxist.

I mean, I attempted to get a Marxist education, which I had never had. When I say that I had never had it, I had tried to grapple with these issues at the very beginning. I can remember, for instance, being in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and going to the library and looking for material on women in socialism, and the only thing I could find in the library was how socialism has failed women. And there's a book called *How Socialism Has Failed Women*. And it's all about the failure, you know, all about the supposed failure of the socialist states around women's issues — very anticommunist, very limited in its perspective.

And, as I said earlier, I was also part of the tail end of the women's liberation movement where women had already sort of moved on, you know, left the left behind, and were, if they considered themselves socialists, were autonomously socialist without a party. So they considered themselves socialist feminist, but, like, what did that mean? I couldn't even figure out what that meant, you know. I mean, there was no — there was just nothing going on. That current of women had, like, Margo Okazawa-Rey, who was in the Combahee River Collective with Barbara, they considered themselves socialist. They had some understanding of what that meant, but I wasn't getting any of that. It was just sort of around.

And there was writing but everything in my organizing life and in my social life and my social circles was sort of carrying me in this other direction so that I didn't — I sort of leaned that way and I sort of leaned

away. I could have done that reading, but I know, we know, that you don't become these things in a vacuum. You don't just read something and then become it, usually. I mean, there are exceptions to that, but, uh, it's not what really gives you the groundedness that you need to carry through on those concepts. And so, I was never, after I came into the movement, I was never an anticommunist. And I think you can read, for instance, the "Identity" essay, and you can see how thoroughly I reject anticommunism in that essay, and of course, that was out of my history in the South — in a way, and in that way Anne Braden and I, I think, come from a similar matrix of understanding the tool that anticommunism was against social struggle, the way it was used to close it down and derail it and divide people.

ANDERSON: You've also said you felt like you didn't go far enough in *Rebellion* in which direction then (both voices) –

9:40

PRATT: And that was it. I mean, it was the — the ending of the "Identity" essay is this kind of, oh, well, if we can just adjust our attitudes towards each other and learn a different way of relating to each other, then things will be OK. And of course, that's not a materialist explanation of how things happen. And what I discovered in the years after finishing the essay and then in the years subsequently is, even during the '90s when I was here with Leslie, is I traveled as an antiracist and still got asked to talk to groups and organizations about how they implement antiracism in their organizations, I saw the limitation of that on a practical level. You can say you want to change your attitudes all you want to, but when there's money involved, and power involved, are you really going to implement that? How far does this attitude go, how far can this attitudinal change survive the material conditions?

So I really got pushed, both by my own organizing experiences and by being closer to real Marxist thinking and analysis, I mean, real thinking, real analysis. Not faux Marxism or distorted Marxism, but people who are really trying to carry out into this moment what it means to think dialectically about the immediate historical conditions. Not guess, not hypo[thetical] — you know, but just, like, what does it mean to try to think about what's happening now?

Both of those things together made me understand the limitations of where I had been, that I needed to look. And I had known this. I mean, I had felt this, like, I don't understand. I thought to myself, I don't understand the economy that I'm living in. I don't understand what is going on. I can't make sense of it. And I wanted to. I can remember reading the business pages in the *Washington Post*, thinking, what is happening? What is happening? Well, with a Marxist economic analysis, you do, you understand what's happening. You really do. It has been, for me, not exactly like, but similar to what happened to me around becoming part of women's liberation. It's like suddenly you think, That's what it was. That's why I didn't get that job. That's why

they put me down in that particular kind of way. That's what happened. Oh, I get it now.

Except this is not just about my personal identity as a woman. This is about why the U.S. is invading Iraq. This is about why the U.S. was sending relief troops to Indonesia after the tsunami. This is about, you know, suddenly I have a way of understanding what is happening in the world. And, well, not suddenly. I've been going to meetings, going to classes, studying, and finding my trajectory as somebody who can now say, I do think I understand enough now to call myself a Marxist, in the sense — maybe not call myself a Marxist, say that I am trying to use Marxist analysis to understand, along with all these other tools that I've accumulated, to understand what's happening, and to use them in the context of women's liberation, and all of these struggles, all of these struggles — and so, as I wrote to you when you sent me the original questions, I now can say, Oh, I'm part of red feminism. I can say now I have another lineage I can claim. I can say I'm part of the lineage of red feminism which goes back quite a ways in this country, but is just now beginning to emerge in the scholarship as historically acknowledged — you know, Kate Weigand's book.

ANDERSON: She's one of our interviewers on this project.

14:00

PRATT: Oh, really. That's a very interesting book, very helpful, within the CP tradition, right? Which is not my immediate tradition, but even something like Robin Kelly's *Hammer and Hoe* — that I saw first, and the way that he did his work out of feminist oral history. He was trained by Jacqueline Dowd Hall, he was trained by these women — Jacqueline who did the Jessie Daniel Ames work, which was so important to me as a white antiracist. I knew her work around that. She trained Robin to go and do these interviews that weren't just looking at the paper trail, but he actually went and interviewed the African American women who were doing this organizing in the South around Communist Party and around other struggles.

So, I found myself in that lineage. I'm beginning to grapple with applying it theoretically to my own work. Most immediately, I've written some pieces. One that I did, an open letter to women's liberation after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, and I put it out on the web — it was a very interesting moment when I did that. I was so angry. I was so angry about these white ruling-class women in the Bush administration who were running the PR campaign and were talking about the poor oppressed women of Afghanistan and they had no intention of bringing any kind of liberation to that country or those women.

Anyway, I was just enraged and I wrote this letter. I put it out on the internet as an open letter, and reconnected to people I hadn't — either I had never, never known, like Ronnie Gilbert sent me a message back: I had never met Ronnie Gilbert. Zilla Eisenstein, never met her: I got a response back from her. And other people I had sort of known. But this current that I had never connected to, connected to me around that letter.

And then, I turned it into an article for *Workers World* and it appeared in the paper. And I've written since then. I've been writing articles for the paper and also speaking. And I did a keynote at the National Women's Studies again. It was in New Orleans and it was about antiracism in the South and I spoke as a white antiracist Southerner and as a Marxist and I talked about the necessity for bringing class struggle into our theorizing, again, going back to that in our work.

And I'm working on a sequel to the *Yours in Struggle* essay. I'm working on a couple of sequels, one that will bridge doing antiracist work with doing anti-imperialist work. What does that mean? Antiracist work is one thing, anti-imperialist work is another: how do we make that bridge? And I'm working, with Chandra Talpade Mohanty, where she would write an introduction. We'd publish the *Identity* essay and then I would add this essay to it and I hope we'd be able to include her and Biddy Martin's essay on my *Identity* essay, where they talk about some of these issues, bring that out as a bridge.

18:20

And then I'm working on something longer that really is sort of about my journey as someone who didn't identify as working class, to someone now who thoroughly understands herself to be part of the working class, now. And what does that mean in relation to women's liberation? What does that mean? What does our vision of women's liberation if we talk about it in connection to class struggle? What does that mean now in the 21st century, living in this country, at this point in time?

So, you know, there's lots more to be written. I'm organizing. When I came to New York, I became active with the International Action Center, which is a coalition group — anti-imperialist, antiracist, coalition group — and very involved in both local demonstrations in New York. So, for instance, demonstrations against police brutality, the Amadou Diallo shooting, for instance. I ended up arrested there. I got arrested in New York more times than I had planned on being arrested. That was under the Guiliani years where we were getting arrested right and left all the time. The Matthew Shepard political funeral. They swept us off the streets, and anyway — not quite the same as the more scripted D.C. arrests. New York is a different scene around these protests. It really, really is. You know, it's a national scene in Washington. They don't want to show anybody getting roughed up too much. In New York, they don't care. They really do not care. In fact, [in] the Capitol, they like to show big money that they can take care of business.

ANDERSON: And what's Southerners on New Ground?

21:00

PRATT: Southerners on New Ground. I wasn't involved in the starting of Southerners on New Ground. Mab Segrest and Pam McMichael, who's in Louisville and is involved in the Kentucky Fairness Alliance in Louisville, and Mab and some other people started it. I'm a member but I was not a mover and shaker around it. They formed to raise economic

issues in relation to sexuality and gender issues. And that was very important work. But they also — my impression, when I talked to Pam and Mab about how they conducted these sessions is that they were very cautious about raising capitalism and that work that they did was sort of pre- the anti-WTO movement.

So, I'm not sure what their stance is now on it, because we're in a different period right now about raising capitalism as a problem, after those big demonstrations, where, you know, I was there, I was in Quebec and we're all getting tear-gassed. I was in Washington when they swept us off the streets there. In these preemptive strikes that they're doing now. I was at most all of the pre-9/11 [anti] WTO demonstrations in North America, and arrested at some of them. And those were around the International Action Center work.

Then there was 9/11 and International Answer was formed. There was a big demonstration in Washington immediately after 9/11. The International Action Center was part of a group that said — you know, WTO actions were planned for that weekend. The more social democratic left called off their participation. The left left didn't, and it was out of that that the International Answer Coalition was formed. We marched on September 29. There were about 25,000 people. Almost no one knows about that demonstration. It was a very moving moment. It was a very thrilling, thrilling moment. Not quite two and a half weeks after 9/11, 25,000 people were in the streets saying, Don't use this as an excuse to go to war. It was the beginning of that big surge of sort of international organizing that peaked and then fell away when the war on Iraq began. The International Action Center — there was a split. International Answer went with another group of people. International Action Center maintained its autonomy.

I work with the IAC but I do more Party work now. I went through a period of time where I evaluated whether I would join the Party [Workers World Party] or not, and I wasn't — for a long time, I wasn't sure that I would. Part of that had to do with trying to figure out why I would join separate from Leslie, as a separate, you know, endeavor. And I decided to join after the war on Afghanistan started. I was living away from here. I was living in upstate New York. I was teaching there for a year as Jane Watson Irwin Chair in Women's Studies at Hamilton College, and I was organizing up there against the war, and I realized that the reason I knew how to deal with the debate that was going on, on all levels, and how I knew how to organize, was because I had been being educated, not just as a Marxist, but as a communist, for quite a few years. Without saying to myself, Oh, this is what I'm going to do. I had learned how to do it.

And I was applying it independently of Leslie, you know, but not independently of the Party in the sense, like, how did I get to be this person? I got to be this person because this whole organization had been training me, very generously, without ever saying, Well, aren't you gonna sign on? Nobody, nobody was pressuring me — nobody. And it's so interesting, I just know how these things work around butch and

24:41

femme. [The way people will think is] it's like, oh, Minnie Bruce is with Leslie now. She's a communist. It's like, you know, go back and look at my work.

ANDERSON: – marry a poet [rather than] be a poet — do you think it's that whole thing?

PRATT: Go back, yeah, go back and look at my writing and see the trajectory I have been on for a really long time. Finally. Now, maybe, I wouldn't have been able to access it, if I hadn't met Leslie. But then, mostly, because there's so much anticommunism around, what I've observed, is that mostly people access it through personal relationships, through a friendship, they get to know somebody at work. It's really hard to access this tradition right now. It's really hard, you know, and I was able to access it through Leslie and, probably, I was longer in making this decision because I was with her. It took me longer to make up my mind. It was complicated by being with her.

So, I was upstate. I was doing all this organizing, and I thought, Whoa. I would be up shit's creek without a paddle if I didn't know how to do all this stuff. How do I know how to do it? Because I've been around these folks who know how to do it. They are a lineage where they're transmitting all these skills, all this knowledge, all this understanding, and I have reaped the benefit of it. And of course, I looked at — I knew more about the history. I saw how that had happened in Alabama. I saw how it had happened in all these different ways, and it certainly was part of my feeling welcomed in — that Monica Moorehead who is a key member of the party, and ran for president in 2000, I think, is from Alabama. Her family's from Wilcox County, from an old African American leading organizing family there, you know, and we identify as being from Alabama together.

So, there I am. Now I'm at this new turn of the kaleidoscope around understanding my life and living out my life. I don't know where it will take me, except that I do know there's a lot more writing to be done. I'm working on a volume of poems right now, *The Only Danger*. [The title is from] "The only danger is not going far enough," Muriel Rukeyser. Trying to finish those poems, and they're all about living life within the working class, very based on Jersey City experience here and what that's like. And I'm also thinking about these things I've talked to you about. And trying to stop the current imperialist aggression in Iraq. We're having a demonstration Saturday, March 19th: Troops Out Now. Bring Them Home. Get the U.S. Out of the Middle East.

ANDERSON: Does this feel like the most dangerous moment you've lived in?

29:15

PRATT: I do think that historically, it's a very, very, heightened moment of political struggle, because of the desperation of the capitalist class in the U.S. about maintaining their economic hold on the world. They're in trouble, you know, the dollar — a fourth, a third or fourth of U.S. debt

is in the hands of Japan and China. Those are real dollars. What happens if they get called in? You know, you see the headlines in the *New York Times*, the Fed is worrying about U.S. debt. The technological ascendancy of the U.S. is declining. Latin America is coming to the fore as an economic power. The East is coming to the fore. [The U.S. is] in the Middle East because they're trying to maintain militarily something that they're having trouble maintaining economically.

But what I saw from my own life is this lesson: that in these imperialist wars are these moments of opportunity, because of the intense pressures they exert upon us, the vast majority of people, the working people of the world, the intense pressures to which we are subjected. I felt it in my own life, you know. My school — I lost my job because my school got into economic difficulties because the Bush administration exerted pressure around the way student loans were being paid out. And I'm out of work. Why are they exerting that pressure? They're trying to scrape together the money wherever they can because they are sinking it into this war. And I am out of work. It's happening, you know, in so many ways, the cuts that are happening.

What will happen? I mean, what I have learned as a Marxist and now a communist, is [that people have a] crude interpretation of Marxism is a kind of Presbyterian determinism. Things are just going to happen. But I've been there, done that. That is not the Marxism that I'm being trained into, which is, you're in the historical moment and certain forces are at play, and we are one of those forces. That's the part that hasn't been, that isn't computed. We are one of the forces. How do we exert our self in this historical moment. We can change it, if we are mobilized and exert ourselves — and that's the if — *if* we are able to mobilize and exert ourselves.

And that's what Marxist Leninism, if you want to call it that, that's what communism is really about. Not about things are going to happen no matter what, but can we take the knowledge that we have and use it to intervene in a historical moment, in a way that can't be done only by the people who are thinking consciously as communists about this moment, but only by a mass struggle. But there is a role to play in that mass struggle. There is a moment to say, Ah, we're at a historical moment. And we think this can come about. If we bring this forward, if we can connect these people, if we can build enough unity.

ANDERSON: Do you think feminism has a role in that?

33:10

PRATT: I absolutely think women's liberation has a role.

ANDERSON: Have you shed the identity of feminist?

PRATT: I don't use that word any more, because now it's so identified with a certain limited brand of second-wave feminism, you know. And I identify with international women's liberation that connects with class struggle and there's a lot of people out there who connect to that

concept. And that's my path right now, is figuring out how to be in that current, how to speak with that current in communication, how to connect organizationally to that current. How to figure out a way — and I don't know what this would mean, to bridge that division that happened between the autonomous women's movement and the socialist feminists and the women who were in the parties, you know, many of whom have left. Angela Davis has left her party, and certainly, there were good reasons for her to do that — you know, limitations around her party's line.

I haven't found those limitations within Workers World. Women's liberation, transgender liberation, lesbian, gay, bi- liberation, its stance around antiracism, its stance around anti-imperialism, the position on the Middle East — I'm in agreement with those positions. I haven't found a limitation, and it feels like a good path for me, but I would also like to build a bridge between the women who are in the autonomous women's liberation movement — I would like to see us connecting more, building unity connections. Not that they necessarily, you know, subscribe to all these [Party] positions, but finding a way to build those connections. Because I know there are women who do share these political positions but find, you know, the concept of [a] party not right for them.

ANDERSON: And like you said, this is a particularly anticommunist moment, so that's going to be really challenging.

PRATT: Yeah, challenging. But it also is around the perception of the [communist] parties as being male dominated.

ANDERSON: Sure.

PRATT: And I can't say this is true at Workers World. (laughs) In fact, there are these jokes — there are these jokes in the past about them — these anticommunist jokes about Workers World being a matriarchy because there's so many, you know, the women's leadership is so definitive.

ANDERSON: We've just got a couple of minutes left

PRATT: Well, you know, here we are at the cusp of the new political moment, and a lot of potential for where that might go, and I feel very strongly that I found a place, again, to break out of those constrictions on how — not just to think, but how to act, how to connect with other people around shattering the old status quo, finding a place of greater freedom and liberation. I feel like I found a good place for myself to do that work. I'm very excited about it. Um, I don't know. I have these plans for the things I'm going to publish and this is a particular date. We'll see after this date.

ANDERSON: Yeah, this is where you are today. Always evolving.

PRATT: That's where I am today. We'll see what emerges out of all this organizing and writing. I'm certainly leading a life I could never have imagined and it's the collective work of millions of people that have opened this moment for me and for that, I'm grateful, so grateful, to the millions of people — I'll never know their names, but they gave me my life. They gave me my life.

ANDERSON: And you've played an important role in giving my generation a life. So, thank you for that, too.

PRATT: You are so welcome. It's not over, either. We're on our way to the next moment.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Thank you.

PRATT: You're welcome.

37:35

END DVD 9

DVD 10

PRATT: So, we're in the kitchen of 147 Chestnut and, uh, this is where we talk and read and cook. Lots of pottery, including pottery from Bibb County, Alabama, made out of the clay of the county there and other various places around the country and the world.

ANDERSON: "The Dirt She Ate Out Of."

PRATT: "The Dirt She Ate Out Of," yep. Here are the plates of the poem right here and the cups and the pitchers out of that home county. And a set of china at the very top, very ornate, that I got for Leslie on her birthday a couple of years ago that came from the social club of a woman who was part of a mafia family in Jersey City. Um, so, I don't know, different things. Plants, books, I don't know what to tell you. Um, we moved into here 12 years ago and we added layer by layer as we lived here.

This is Leslie's office, crammed with books, and my office, crammed with books and papers. A quilt from West Virginia and a painting, an etching by Soni Martin, who was an artist in Fayetteville when I was there that I am very fond of because of what it says about secrets and telling. And –

ANDERSON: And your office is pink, in case it doesn't show up.

PRATT: My office — this is the color that it was when I moved in here. It just so happened to be. Um, my altar that has accumulated many things over the years. A picture of me and the boys on the Potomac that Joan Biren took and was used on the back of *Crime Against Nature*. Oh, so many things. I'm not going to tell you about all of them. Mussel shells from the Cahaba River here.

ANDERSON: Is that you with one of your grandchildren up there?

PRATT: This is me with Simon when Simon was just born, like, just a week old, I guess, maybe. And a little bit of tating that my grandmother did that I have in a purse. And the red clay that came from the road between Centreville and Selma, which is where I was born. Slag from the iron works of Bibb County that were used to produce weaponry for the Confederacy. A million things. I won't go into all of them. This is the front room. More books, right?

ANDERSON: Do you guys have a lot of books in storage, too?

PRATT: A lot of books, books in storage, papers in storage. This is a dresser that was my dresser when I was a little girl. It was in my room in Centreville and has traveled with me through all my adult years. I'm very fond of it as a mirror.

ANDERSON: It's so beautiful.

PRATT: I feel like this mirror has seen me grow up, from being a very, very little girl until now. I've been in this mirror with myself. So, I'm very attached to it as a witness to my life. And we just got this quilt ladder. We're slowly accumulating quilts. My mother gave me this one. A woman in Centreville made it. This is a Native Star quilt from Pine Ridge. And my mother made this one when she was a young woman. She made this one. This belle in her bonnet and her parasol. I know. And this is our mantle. We just added this star. We found it in the West Village just the other day.

And this is something that Leslie gave me when we were first together. It's a little gingerbread house and it has [written on it] Palace of Truth: Inquire Within. When we were first together, she quoted Radclyffe Hall's lover-partner-wife, to me, and Radclyffe Hall went to Una [Troubridge] and said, when she was about to publish *The Well of Loneliness*, "It's going to change our lives and I want to know how you feel about that." And Una said to her, "I only want to live with you in the palace of truth." So, that's where we live. We try, anyway, to live in the palace of truth.

And these are the books that I'm reading now because I'm working on these poems. I pull my rocking chair up to the windows sometimes and I look out over New York and I read these various books. George Oppen. Julia De Burgos. Lola Ridge. John Wheelwright. Frederic Engels. Karl Marx. *Writing Red: Women Writers, 1930-1940. Yiddish Song.*

ANDERSON: And there's the stunning view.

PRATT: And there's the view. There's the view, looking down on Jersey City. This is my corner, Chestnut and Summit. Well, Chestnut and Pavonia, actually. We're a block from Summit, a couple of blocks from Summit. And this is the turnpike and Jersey City and then the towers of Wall Street West rising at the edge of Jersey City. The capital sort of comes over to our side of the river. This is our view.

ANDERSON: We are [thinking] about capitalism all the time, right?

PRATT: No kidding. And these poems that I'm working on, they have these views from the window. I have poems that are happening out in the streets and then we have these moments where I'm here in the apartment and I'm looking imaginatively farther than I can see, and this view of capitalism is definitely there in those moments.

ANDERSON: OK. Let's turn it off.

PRATT: OK. We get to see where we are and that's it. And the film lasted this long.

ANDERSON: Yes. Thank you.

PRATT: Thank you.

7:03

END DVD 10

END INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Luanne Jette.

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