

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

BARBARA SMITH

Interviewed by

LORETTA J. ROSS

May 7–8, 2003
Northampton, MA

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Narrator

Barbara Smith (b. 1946) grew up in Cleveland. A 1969 graduate of Mount Holyoke College, in 1973 she co-founded the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist organizing group. In 1977 she wrote “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” which charted a black women’s literary tradition. As co-founder with Audre Lorde of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, Smith promoted publication of women’s writing. She edited three landmark collections of black feminist thought: *Conditions 5: The Black Women’s Issue* (1979), *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982), and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). She published a collection of essays, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*, in 1998. A public intellectual and grassroots organizer, Smith is noted for her scholarship (Bunting Fellow, 1996–97) and her activism (Stonewall Award, 1994).

Interviewer

Loretta Ross (b. 1953) became involved in black nationalist politics while attending Howard University, 1970–73. A leader in the anti-rape and anti-racism movements in the 1970s and 1980s, she founded the International Council of African Women and served as Director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women and Program Director for the National Black Women’s Health Project. After managing research and program departments for the Center for Democratic Renewal, an anti-Klan organization, in 1996 Ross established the National Center for Human Rights Education, which she directed through 2004. In 2005 she became director of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective. The Loretta Ross Papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection; the Voices of Feminism Project also includes an oral history with Ross.

Abstract

In this oral history Barbara Smith describes her childhood in an emotionally warm and culturally rich family that valued education and race work. The interview focuses on her activism as a grassroots organizer, writer, and publisher. Smith’s story details the political challenges and personal costs of being a pioneer in radical coalition politics against imperialism, racism, and sexism, and homophobia.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Six 60-minute tapes. Transcribed by Colleen Sackheim. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Smith, Barbara. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording, May 7–8, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Barbara Smith, interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, May 7, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

Transcript

Bibliography: Smith, Barbara. Interview by Loretta Ross. Transcript of video recording, May 7–8, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Barbara Smith, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, May 7, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 64–67.

Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 7-8, 2003, with:

BARBARA SMITH
Albany, NY

at: Smith College

by: LORETTA ROSS

[interview begins (first 11 pages of original transcript) with discussion of protocol and equipment; Smith says that she'd like to talk about identity politics; both Smith and Ross mention sense of privilege and gratitude to be involved in the project]

07:18

ROSS: [laughs] I have to apologize that I get to practice on you.

SMITH: It's not practicing though, because as they say, life has prepared you, all that has gone before, including our friendship.

ROSS: Well, Barbara, I swear, I was reading your biography—I read it when you sent it to me and I reread it again today as a way of getting prepared—and I am amazed at the number of intersections in our lives. [Smith: Uh huh] And I had never thought about it in that way. [Smith: Right.] And I was like, I am so blessed to have this woman in my life. And you know, when an atheist starts talking about being blessed, you know it must be momentous! [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] I actually use that term, too.

ROSS: First of all, let's just go through some very pragmatic information. I'd like you to give your name, address, your current phone number and your email address, for the record.

SMITH: My name is Barbara Smith. My address is 235 Livingston Avenue, Albany, New York, 12210-2532. My telephone number is 518 436 1279. My email address is BSM3835992@aol.com.

ROSS: Why don't you start by telling me your year of birth, your place of birth and your educational background.

08:44

SMITH: OK. I was born on November 16, 1946, in Cleveland, Ohio. I was the first of a set of twins and we are the only siblings that our mother had.

I want to say that I came from a family of black southern women. Even though I grew up in the North, the kind of rearing that my sister and I had was very southern and very traditional because everyone in our family had come from way down in a little town in Georgia called Dublin, which is between Macon and Savannah. And they had done a serial migration, starting probably in the late 1920s up to the 1940s. I think all of my grandmother's sisters were in the North by the time I was conscious, you know.

Because of their roots in the South, I really felt that I got in some ways the best of both worlds because, of course, they had moved North to get away from Jim Crow white supremacy and white racist terrorism, besides also wanting the economic possibilities that living in the industrial North might bring to them. But as far as values, point of view, all those things, I just feel very rooted in core black culture, which is traditionally the culture of the South. So I just wanted to say that.

ROSS: I notice you didn't mention your father.

10:30

SMITH: That's right. The reason I did not mention my father is because I've never seen so much as a photograph of him. We were raised without our father and we were also raised without information about him. The only thing I know about him is his name and...

ROSS: And that is?

SMITH: Gartrell Smith. That's an unusual name. Recently, when I got a computer that actually functioned like a computer is supposed to, and I do mean recently, within the last six months—it was a reconditioned one but it actually works—one of the first things I did was look at ancestry sites to see if I could find him. And I did indeed find some hits—because even though Smith is like, forget about it as far as ever finding anybody, we're more than needles in haystacks because it is the most common name in the United States—with that first name. And it was interesting. I haven't done that again. I'm waiting for my sister and I to have enough time, some time during a visit to do it together. One of my mother's first cousins...

ROSS: And your mother's name?

11:48

SMITH: My mother's name was Hilda Beall Smith. But Smith was also a family name within our family because one of my great aunts, one of my grandmother's sisters [Aunt Rosa], who never married, her last name was Smith. So we grew up, you know, with supposedly our father's name. But as I said, Smith was also a name within the family, a maiden

name so to speak. But in any event, one of my mother's first cousins, who only died just a few years ago and who was known for being very outspoken and not, you know, necessarily going along with the program—as witnessed by the fact that she had a job once as a barmaid [laughs] scandal, scandal—we grew quite close, you know, as years went on. And she actually told me some things about my father and what had happened.

My mother was a college graduate. She graduated from Fort Valley State College in the mid 40s. A little black college at that time—segregated black college—in Georgia. So that was the mid-1940s. Apparently, my father had been in WWII, or at least he was in the armed services. And given our birth date it was as the war was ending that they were together. But supposedly, according to this first cousin of my mother who I always called Aunt Isabel, he came to Cleveland with a ring. And he stayed at the Y. And apparently he did not pass muster with my grandmother and with the great aunts who were my mother's aunts. And from what I understand, you know, they were basically disapproving of the marriage and so my mother ran away with him, which is highly romantic. And that may be why I'm such a romantic, or failed romantic, or whatever, you know.

But that's a very romantic kind of origin story. And I didn't know it until a few years ago. And so they ran away together and then she returns. I don't know where they went. But she returns. And she was looking extremely sad.

My mother's first cousin who told me this, Aunt Isabel, was somewhat younger than my mother, so she was still a teenager, and she also was a real party girl and just having a lot of fun. So she said, I'm bobbing around and I'm having so much fun and I didn't know what was wrong with Hilda. So one day I ask Hilda, What's wrong, you know? You're just so down. And my mother said to her, Don't you know?

And what of course Isabel did not know is that my mother was pregnant with my sister and myself. And Isabel, she actually told me that our mother sought to find an abortion. But obviously she was not successful. [laughs] And it was of course completely illegal at that time. [laughs] And in some ways it was too much information. That's all I know about my father.

As twins we were born quite prematurely. Really hanging by a thread. The story I remember is that we were told that we weighed less than five pounds together. And today, that's a high-risk baby. But back in 1946, an incubator in those days was nothing but an egg carton with some lights [laughs]. I mean the incubator was not much, you know what I'm saying? And we were in the incubators. And my sister, who is seven minutes younger than I, she had pneumonia. I did not. So she stayed in the incubator longer and she also stayed in the hospital longer. But we were really hanging by a thread. But I always felt because of

these stories that I'm spinning and telling you, I've always felt that I had a destiny and obviously I was supposed to make it and be here sitting here today.

ROSS: Is your mother still alive?

16:09

SMITH: Oh no. Our mother died when we were nine years old.

ROSS: So you were raised by...

SMITH: Raised by...

ROSS: extended family?

SMITH: Well, yes, absolutely. Our grandmother was always our primary caretaker because our mother had to work, like most black women, and particularly a black woman who did not have a husband. So our mother, with her college degree, a Bachelor's of Science in Education, the two jobs that she had during my young life as I know them were, the first job was that she was a nurse's aide and the other one was she was a supermarket clerk. She was a supermarket clerk when she died with her Bachelor's of Science in Education. And, again, that's a typical black woman's story of that era. She tried to get certified in the state of Ohio as we were beginning kindergarten. But they sent her to schools, or at least a school if not more than one, that were, you know, had some of the worst problems of schools in the city. And she was so disheartened by what she found there, she decided to go back to the supermarket where she was the head clerk, you know, and kind of like a manager, although her job was called supermarket clerk. But she I think did some bookkeeping and things that had more responsibility.

Our mother had had rheumatic fever as a child. And of course, this is when they're living way down in Dublin, Georgia, who knows what the medical facilities for black people were like then. And she was born in 1922. And in the spring of 1956—although these two incidents are unrelated, they were related in our minds, my sister's and mine—she was on a public city bus that had an accident. She was slightly injured, from what I know. I think she was treated. I don't know that she was hospitalized overnight. But the thing is, that was kind of the beginning of the period of our mother being ill. It began with this accident, you know, which was very upsetting, of course. And then not long after that she went into the hospital, never to return. Because the rheumatic fever had weakened her heart.

And whenever I hear anything nowadays about heart transplants and artificial hearts and bypasses and what have you, my heart hurts in a way because I think, Wow, they didn't have that in 1956, you know. If they'd had it, maybe I would have had a mother. But in any event, as I

said, she went into the hospital in May. And she died in October, October 16th, 1956.

So our grandmother continued to be our caretaker. We lived in a two-family house. We didn't have to change anything.

ROSS: Excuse me. Given your mother's educational background, what role did education play in your life?

19:00

SMITH: Education was the bottom line. It still is. [laughs]

ROSS: Tell me about it. You've gone on to become a teacher.

SMITH: Education was the bottom line in my family. Most people in this country, whether they were black, white, male, female, did not have college degrees in the 1940s. The high school diploma was the thing that most people, you know, sought to get and many did not even get that. So our mother was highly educated for a black woman of her time, even though she was not able to use that professionally which was, as I said, typical of African-American women in relationship to racism and employment during most of the years that we've been in this country. She brought that to us. We got started on the absolute right track. My family also, even my grandmother and her sister—though they were not college graduates, our mother was the only one. She had a brother and a sister. Neither of them were college graduates, nor did they attend college.

But all of the people in my family were really educationally motivated and my grandmother and her sisters taught school in the segregated schools of the South in the early twentieth century even without having completed any college. Because, of course, that's how it worked. If you were bright, the white people would pick certain people, you know, to just basically teach those other people. And that's, I think, how my grandmother and her sisters got to do that. I did have a great aunt, the one I mentioned, my Aunt Rosa, who did not marry and whose last name was then Smith, my Aunt Rosa did take normal courses at Spelman. But those were like summer courses.

My Aunt Rosa, all my great aunts, were very important to me. And at least one of them lived with us through my entire growing-up years. Aunt Rosa lived with us from time to time. She treated us like we were two of her little pupils. So I mean I know how to do every little craft there is. [laughs] I know how to make a May basket to this day, you know. [laughs] Valentines, shamrocks, Easter eggs, you name it. Cut out and decorated. But she would teach us to do those things just like she used to do with the little kids she was teaching down South years before.

One of the things I love about my family's attitude toward education is that it was always about the thing itself and not what it was going to

get for you. So that's probably why I don't have a pot to piss in to this day [laughs], because we were never motivated around things. I mean people like nice things, you know. But there were so many things that were so much more important than material objects. So I just really feel like they were purely committed to using your gifts, whatever they were, to the best and most challenging level of your ability. Just for the sake of saying I did my work on the planet, as opposed to, if you get these kinds of grades you can get this. I never got a dime for a grade. Not ever. Neither did my sister.

The only grade we ever aspired to was an A. And by that I mean maybe we didn't have to work that hard for an A, but we worked pretty hard anyway. I never was interested in any other grade except for an A. [laughs] But that wasn't because someone was threatening me at home. It was not about that. It was like, We go to work every day. You go to school. School is your job. And when we would come home with these beautiful report cards, our grandmother would look at them and you know what she said? she said, That's nice, sweetheart. That's nice. It wasn't like, Wow, look at all those As. Let me get out my pocketbook! It wasn't even about that. There was no intimidation around achieving in school. It was just like, you have a mind, you're supposed to use it.

And they were big readers, you know. The people in my family read all the time. My grandmother read primarily the Bible and other religious books and pamphlets. She was very involved in our church. Our family subscribed to two daily newspapers. There were three in Cleveland at the time. We got the black newspaper that was published once a week. We had magazines.

And what you can hear is that we were not dirt poor. But of course, my grandmother, who was born in 1886, whenever we would ask for something, either money or some object, she said, we're poor people. [laughs] But by working together, the family—it really was all about people working together—that's why we owned that two-family house, because our aunt, our mother's sister, her husband at the time, and our mother, all their incomes were flowing into this one household. That's how that happened. It wasn't about any kind of silver spoons or whatever.

So the family was doing obviously better than they had been when they were down in Georgia. But as my dear uncle said—he died in 2001, so he out-lived his sisters by many decades—before he got Alzheimer's and couldn't really communicate, he said, The house we had down in Dublin, you could look down and see the earth through the floor boards and you could look up at the ceiling and see the sky.

And that's the kind of house that was, you know what I'm saying? [laughs] So often people, when they hear about my educational background and also my sister's—because she has pursued higher education as well—they make certain assumptions that are not necessarily true.

But as I said, it was really about the life of the mind. These people discussed things. So when we were first growing up, they would listen to the news on the radio. Radio was still the thing. TV really hadn't come in. And then TV came in, you know, when we were 5 or 6, and we did have a TV. And they would watch the news. We thought the news was dull, of course, I mean, you know, all these white men telling us how who knows what, you know. [laughs] Oh the news, who cares. But the thing is not only did they watch it, they talked about it. And because it was an extended family all living under one roof, there were, you know, at least four adults on any given day who could have a conversation. It wasn't just like mom and pop, it was like at least four adults who could sit down and talk, you know. So that was kind of the way it was.

ROSS: Well, tell me about the whole process of getting matriculated.

26:15

SMITH: Oh, you mean getting to college?

ROSS: Or going through high school. Going to college. What were your college experiences like?

SMITH: Oh please. [laughs]

ROSS: The process of getting to college...

SMITH: [laughs] Whoa!

ROSS: ...which was not a given...

SMITH: Right. Indeed.

ROSS: ...for a black...

SMITH: Oh not at all.

ROSS: ...woman in your circumstances.

SMITH: Not at all.

ROSS: And then...

SMITH: Not at all.

ROSS: ...what happened in college.

SMITH: Well, my sister and I really liked school, because we were very, very shy. People can't believe that when I tell them how shy I was in my early years. I am still shy. I don't think you ever get over being shy. I think that you adjust, you know, you make compensations for it. But I think once a shy person, always a shy person, you know. But in those days it was manifested. And so because we didn't talk that much we didn't really create a lot of problems in any classroom situation. So we both did our work very well and we kept quiet. That's part of the combination for education in the 50s, you know.

So we did very well in school. We only lived in two houses the entire time we were growing up. The first was a house that was rented. It was in the central area, which was the core black community in Cleveland. That's like saying Harlem. The central area was like Harlem, you know, as far as the concentration of black population. When we were six years old, in first grade, our family bought the two-family house that I've already mentioned. And we all moved out there.

And one of the reasons was excellent schools, public schools of course. So we went to Robert Fulton. We started at Bolton Elementary School. And then in the middle of first grade we moved, and we went to Robert Fulton Elementary School. And one of the things about the new neighborhood is that it had a lot more white people in it. At our old school there were virtually no white people except for the teachers. And we had some black teachers too in that short time that we were at that first school.

I will never forget the first day of school at the new school, Robert Fulton. Our mother told my sister and myself, she said, There are going to be more white children in your class from now on. And she said not another word about it. [laughs] It wasn't like, They're going to act like this and this is how you're supposed to feel and, you know. No attitude. Just facts. There are going to be a lot more white people there. At least that's how I recall it.

And so we went and there they were, you know. But because we weren't creating a lot of chaos in and of ourselves, you know, we weren't doing a lot of that in school or any of that, you know, we basically got by. And there was definitely racism. The first racism we experienced though was not at the school, it was in an educational context—but I don't think I'll go into that. But the thing is...

ROSS: I'd like you to...

SMITH: OK. I forget how many hours we have.

ROSS: This is part of what makes Barbara.

SMITH: Right, indeed. OK. Well, Cleveland was one of the ten largest cities in the country when I was growing up. So I've always lived in a

metropolis until now, because Albany's not that. I was very much shaped by a very vibrant, urban environment. And, of course, there were many resources, particularly cultural, that we got to take advantage of, both through home and school. The summer we were seven we went to day camp. And the summer that we were eight we were picked from kids all over the city and the suburbs to go take French at Western Reserve University. And our family said OK, that's a good idea, we'll let them do that.

Our aunt, who was our second favorite person in the world and whose name actually was LaRue—"the street" in French, I don't know where that came from—our Aunt LaRue had studied French in high school herself. And she used to say things to us in French, and we were just like, What? It was so interesting. And we laughed and thought it was really a lot of fun. So we took French at Western Reserve University.

I do believe it was such a time, if you can believe it, that two little girls, eight years old, could ride the bus, a public bus, by themselves. And we always had each other. Other kids were on the buses because it was the 50s, you know, and we would ride over there in the morning. I don't know, it might have been a special school bus that picked us up, who knows. But anyway we would go over to Western Reserve University, which was some distance from where we lived. And we had this French teacher, and there again, there were white kids in the class. I think there were perhaps three or four black students in an average-size class.

And our teacher treated us horribly. Now I told you that my sister and I were very shy. And being shy doesn't really mix very well with learning to speak a language. You had to really put yourself out there in a way that a shy child might be reluctant to do, which was exactly the case with us. I always say because of how we were raised we both felt that way. But we weren't causing any other kind of problem for our teacher, and she was incredibly mean to us.

And in later years we began to realize that the reason she treated us the way she did is that she did not think we needed to be there and she was really racist. And she treated the other black kids, the couple of other black kids in the sea of white faces, she treated them very awfully as well.

I'll never forget, this is the worst part of it. I mean the teacher, that was one thing. But because it was a long class, about three hours every morning during the week, there would be a break and kids would bring snacks. And it was the 50s, so most people's mothers were not working then. And they would bring snacks, often homemade, that their mothers had made for them. And although our mother worked she was a great baker, and we loved making cookies with her and cakes, too. And so we asked her, begged her, could you please make cookies for us so we can take them to class and we can share them with the other children. Well,

out of her full-time work schedule, she of course complies and made chocolate-chip cookies. And we took them to class. Do you think any of those white children would touch them? I will never forget it as long as I live.

People don't know about US apartheid. We had our system of apartheid. I grew up under apartheid. I grew up under segregation even though it was the North. People forget or never knew the level of demonization and vilification and dehumanization that was part and parcel of being a person of African heritage living in this country up until the civil rights movement. I lived under that. And as I said, one of the worst examples that I can think of is when these yahoos, these creatures, rejected my dear mother's cookies. Wouldn't touch them because, you know, we were black and they came from a black home.

ROSS: The irony is that most whites were then eating the food their black servants were cooking...

33:20

SMITH: I guess it had something to do with pay being paid, and also being able to monitor and observe, you know. [laughs] And oh, that reminds me. I should say every woman in my family did domestic work. I mean, please, that's just par for the course. And the stories that they would tell—some of them were doing it when we were growing up. My great aunts were still doing it, until they became too infirm. But they had all done domestic work. My sister and I are the first females in our family not to have done it on a regular basis, or ever.

ROSS: So how did you go from that experience in school, to college?

34:00

SMITH: Well, as I said, the schools were really good in our neighborhood, in our community. And we took to academics like ducks to water. When we were in fourth grade, that's when our mother was ill. We were picked. They had a special school, more than one, probably, in the whole system. But they had a special school for academically talented children. It was called Boulevard. That was the one that was nearest to us on the East Side. The East Side was where black people lived, you know. West Side, no black people. That's changed now.

And we were picked, you know, we were tested. Because our mother died at the very point that we would have changed schools, the family made the decision that we would stay at our old school. Because they thought that it would just be too traumatic for us having lost, you know, the center of our life, to have to go to a new school and adjust to that as well. So we stayed at Robert Fulton although we had been, you know, picked for that school.

We went to Alexander Hamilton Jr. High School. The patriarch. And then we went to John Adams High School, another patriarch. [laughs] The so-called, you know, pillar patriarch of the country. In any event,

John Adams High School was one of the best academic high schools in the city of Cleveland. And we had a wonderful guidance counselor in particular.

By that time there was tracking, as they called it in my day, sections. So we were in the academically talented section. We never really saw other kids that much, although we did see them in orchestra, in gym, on the school newspaper. But the thing is that our classes, our academic subjects, we were like just a little group within a sea of thousands. Because it was the postwar baby boom. There were over three thousand people in my high school. And we were bursting at the seams, you know. But we got the best of the best.

I recently reconnected with one of the boys I was in high school with. And we were talking, reminiscing about those days. And he said, Well, Barbara, it was like going to a private school except that it was public. And that was because we got so many of the great teachers and because they just challenged the hell out of us, intellectually. They really wanted us to excel and do all that we could do, not just the bare minimum. So we took Honors English in preparation for Advanced Placement English, which we my sister and I took. We also went to summer school to prepare to take Advanced Placement European History. We only had, I think, two or three Advanced Placement courses at that time. But back in the early 60s—that's when I was in high school—Advanced Placement wasn't nearly as widespread as it now.

So we had a wonderful guidance counselor, probably the best one in the school. Her name was Miss White. And Miss White, of course, was white. And she was an incredible person in my life because she challenged all of us to apply to the most competitive schools that she thought we were qualified to apply to. So I went to Mount Holyoke College. It's a stone's throw from where we're sitting. And so many of the black women students who I met there—it's a women's college—many of them would tell me about how, when they brought up Mount Holyoke, the response was, Oh, you can't go there. That's not for you, you know.

If I had a dime for every time I've heard the story, if I had a dime for every time a black student or a black person, former student, has told me the story of the response they got from a white guidance counselor about what they were supposed to do with their future, you know, I would have at least a few dollars. Because that is the more common response.

We had the opposite. I'll never forget. And because we were in those academically talented sections they really were mindful of our path to college early on. But even long before that, our mother had gone to college and we knew about college before we started kindergarten. When people used to ask my sister and me, What do you want to be when you grow up?—I guess they still ask that, but they certainly did back then [laughs] in the conservative 50s—we always used to say, Oh,

we're going to go to college. I remember the first time I looked up college in a dictionary. I didn't know how to spell it but I was looking for it. I was spelling it with an "a." [laughs]

But in any event, I remember that I went to see Miss White during the earlier years of my being in high school. And I was definitely looking at colleges, I knew about all the ones in Ohio, you know, or many of the ones in Ohio, because the state schools would admit black students, whereas of course, private, elite schools in Ohio or anywhere else generally did not during that period. But in any event, she asked me what I was thinking about and I said I had heard about this women's college in the state of Ohio called Lake Erie College for Women. I don't know if it still exists or not. Most of the single-gendered colleges have gone co-ed at this point. But in any event, I told her that I had, you know, that I was looking at and had heard about Lake Erie College for Women.

And you know what she said to me? She said, Oh, Barbara, she said, you can do better than that. So that's exactly the opposite. And there was something now the civil rights movement had a completely positive effect on the choices I had around my education. Because I have also met black women who were just a few years older than I. When I tell them I went to Mount Holyoke, I will never forget one woman saying to me, Ah, I wish I could have gone there. And it wasn't because she wasn't qualified. It was that she was just enough older than I that it wasn't even an option. Because the only black students who were at these kinds of colleges in those days were the ones who, number one, could pass for white or were so wealthy they fit in, you know, to at least the class structure. You had very light-skinned black people, you know, who were passing, or not passing, but who could fit in on that level. And we're talking about tiny numbers, you know. We're not talking about more than two or three. But the thing is that those were the kind of women who got to go to the Seven Sister colleges.

But in any event, because of the civil rights struggle these schools were under pressure. In order to get federal funding, or to keep federal funding, they had to desegregate, because of course *Brown v. Board of Education* had occurred in 1954. So that was really opening the dam of what public institutions of all kinds, but in this case educational ones, what they had to do in order to be compliant. So it wasn't just about, you know, benevolence, or whatever. It's like, if we want to keep getting those federal dollars we've got to demonstrate that this is not a segregated institution. However it happened there was a program at Yale called the Cooperative Program for Educational Opportunity. And the guy who ran it was named Charlie McCarthy. Not hard to forget [laughs] or not hard to remember that name.

Anyway, my sister and I always tested well. And that's one of the things I like to tell people too, whenever they talk about how the—well I know the SAT is biased. But the thing is, there are actually some

people who are black who can do well on tests and did. Because my sister and I aced every test we took, whether it was standardized or otherwise. And after he saw our PSAT scores—because our guidance counselor was in contact with him—after he saw our PSAT scores, he called her up and he said, Have them apply to every single school they want to. And they paid our application fees.

The Ivy League was completely closed to women at that time, so none of the Ivy League universities or colleges were possibilities. Wesleyan, Williams, Dartmouth, of course Yale, Harvard—none of that was even on the agenda. We couldn't apply because we were females. So ironic, given the fact that we were also black. But in any event, her whole thing was the Seven Sisters. And when I found out about Mount Holyoke—you know, I was doing my research and getting the catalogues—when I found out about Mount Holyoke I said, that's the one. And it was based on very little information.

I believe that someone from admissions at Mount Holyoke was coming to our high school to do a presentation on the day that Kennedy was assassinated. That was the day that person was scheduled to come. I remember that the visit was canceled for a very, very significant reason. So that person never came. But the thing is, in those days students, no matter how well off, generally did not travel to visit colleges from as far away as the Midwest. So what you had when you were not on the east coast, you had these college teas that alums who were in the area would have. So we got to see some of the greater mansions [laughs] in Cleveland where heretofore our people had only entered to clean, you know. And there was a lot of discomfort, you know. We were going with some of the other girls, you know, from our school and it's like, Whoa, look at all this up in here, you know. And of course they didn't know how to deal with us, because they had never interacted socially with black people in their damn lives. [laughs]

But anyway, the people at the Mount Holyoke functions, they were the nicest ones amongst them. I mean the other ones—I don't know if I should mention them. Why not? Wellesley, they were snots, you know. Pembroke, that was OK. My guidance counselor loved Pembroke. Pembroke does not exist anymore. It was a women's college at Brown. But she really wanted my sister and myself both to go to Pembroke. And let's see, Smith, well here we are at Smith. My sister applied to Smith. Smith wanted her in the worst way. But she went to the University of Chicago. She changed her mind every couple of weeks during that period.

But once I found Mount Holyoke I knew that was the one. And one of the things about Mount Holyoke is that it has a very different tradition and origin story than the rest of these schools. It was founded by a visionary woman, Mary Lyon, who went around the New England countryside with this dream of starting some kind of educational institution for women, at a time that girls and women were not being

educated. It is the oldest of the Seven Sisters. It was founded in 1837 as a seminary. And she literally collected pennies from farm wives, New England farm wives, to start the school. And it just has a different tradition, you know, than some of these others. I'm not saying it wasn't elitist. I'm not saying it wasn't racist. I'm not saying [laughs] it wasn't white supremacist. And I'm also not saying I did not suffer the trials of the damned.

ROSS: Tell me about some of them.

45:45

SMITH: Oh, my goodness. My goodness. How long do we have?

Well, the worst thing about being there. We had never traveled, you know. The farthest I had been away from home was either Buffalo or Pittsburgh and neither one of those are far from Cleveland, let's face it. We never traveled, you know, went on vacation. I mean most black people didn't do that too much. If you went somewhere in the summer you went to visit your people in the South or in some other city. So we had never really traveled.

And we certainly, as twins, had not been separated. So that was a hard part of it. I went to one end of the country and my sister went to the other, you know, in a manner of speaking. The fact that the school was virtually segregated at the time I entered in '65. There were less than thirty black students at Mount Holyoke when I entered. And the enrollment at that time was probably around fifteen hundred, sixteen hundred. So we were in a tiny minority, numerically.

The worst part of being there, besides the incredible racial isolation, was an assumption that was made known to us pretty clearly that many of our professors, too many—if it was one, it was too many. But the thing is, we got the message that a significant number of people did not think we belonged there. And that was both students and teachers.

ROSS: When you say, We got the message, what does that mean?

47:10

SMITH: Well, let's see. How many ways.

Here's a story that didn't happen to me but happened to one of my closest friends when I was in school. The black girls—and we were “girls,” the women's movement hadn't happened, so even if you were a young woman in college you still used the term girls. I always have to, you know, revamp my language for what we called ourselves at the time...

But one of my friends in college who was in my class, let's see, how did it happen? Her roommate—white, of course—her roommate had arrived before she did. This is first year, our freshman year as we called it. And her roommate's mother and the roommate started putting their things into the room, including drapes and what have you. My friend, whose name is Sharon Ains—at the time Sharon Ainsworth, Shay,

nickname Shay—Shay and her mother arrive, come into the room, introduce themselves. And when the mother of her assigned roommate sees them, she snatches the curtains off the wall and takes her daughter out of there.

And Shay told me—I didn't know Shay my first year, I met her my second year—Shay told me about what a horrible—now here you are, you're entering college, it's your first day of college and, you know, Miss Ann is pulling her Scarlett O'Hara trip! But instead of taking the drapes down [laughs] and making an outfit out of them, she's taking the drapes down to really be a racist, you know, and to attack a young, a child really, a young black child.

When Shay told me about this, she said she knew that it was the mother and not the daughter, but she said how uncomfortable it was for them that entire school year, living in the same dormitory. Because they did end up living in the same dormitory and having to deal with each other after that performance, you know. So that's a strong message.

I had a professor for religion, probably my first year. And Mount Holyoke was extremely formal at that time. I entered under the old rules. We had "gracious living." We had curfews. Now people have keys to the dorms. There was none of that going on. Men in rooms? Forget about it, you know. I mean it was like the 50s way of doing things because I started in '65. A lot of stuff happened between '65 and '69 in the country and in the world. But we were still going by the old school rules.

And in any event, we would have these formal dinners twice a week called gracious living. And you had to wear what you would wear to church. That's what you were told. So you wore not just your little denim skirt or whatever, you wore stockings, heels, appropriate dress. And you often then would invite your professors for that meal. You could invite them other times, too. But often professors were invited for gracious living. Wednesday night and Sunday, middle of the day.

And so for one of these gracious livings they invited my religion professor, who was an old white man. I guess he was a minister. He sure didn't act like he was godly. And he made a remark. We were waiting to go into the dining room. Now I was in his class, and since the seniors who had invited him knew I was one of his students, they invited me to sit in their hallowed presence with him, you know, when he came to dinner. So we were waiting to go into the dining room and he asked me, Where are you from? And I said, Cleveland. And there were several girls from Cleveland in my class at Mount Holyoke because, as I told you, Cleveland had excellent public schools. And it was a huge city. And when I say Cleveland, he said, There are a lot of you all here from there, aren't there? And then he just really made it known that he thought that we didn't deserve to be there, that we were taking somebody else's place.

Another thing. I had a wonderful friend who became the second black woman judge in the state of Massachusetts [Marie Therese Oliver]. She was in my class as well. First day I met her, first year. So the first day I met her—you know, how you're introducing yourself and talking about what are you going to major in and what do you want to do when you grow up, even though it's now in a college context. So we're talking. And she said, I'm going to go to law school, preferably Harvard Law School, and I'm going to be an attorney.

Now, in those days, I mean, I had no game plan. I just knew I wanted to write. That's what I knew. But I had no more idea how you did that than doing nuclear fission in a kitchen sink. I had no idea. So I was really impressed that she knew exactly what she wanted to do, and she did it. She not only did it, she became the second black woman judge in the state of Massachusetts.

So she had a job working in the administration building, in I don't know, the admissions office or dean of students office, wherever. But she was being a great researcher and investigator. In her duties working in the administration office, she found out there was something called a high-risk file. And every single black woman at Mount Holyoke was in the high-risk file. Now that was really—that was a real message. I mean, we had Presidential scholars, we had National Merit Scholars, we had the cream of the crop—and yet they all thought we were high risk. Why? Melanin, I guess.

ROSS: Or they knew they were providing a racist atmosphere...

52:58

SMITH: Yes.

ROSS: ...and you may not survive.

SMITH: Yes. Well, the thing is they were concerned about their attrition rate. That's exactly it. They were concerned about their attrition rate. And who the hell. I mean Mount Holyoke is the boon docks, it's the woods. It was the serious woods.

ROSS: That was not an uncommon experience...

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: ...of many black kids going to college in that period, which did result in a high attrition rate.

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: What about you made you not only survive, but thrive?

53:30

SMITH: Oh, I don't know if I thrived. I mean, eventually I thrived. [laughs] But it was rough going. It was rough going my first two years. I knew I was going to finish college, because I wanted to have a better life than not going would provide for me.

And of course my dreams, they were not about materialism. They were about going to Paris, you know, and being an expatriate black writer. That's what I wanted to do. And I knew that there were people who had done that. In fact, I thought the only way you could really be a black writer was to get your behind over to Paris, you know [laughs], because the great ones did that! You know, Wright, Baldwin, Chester Himes. Hey, good enough for them, good enough for me.

But the thing is that I did know I wanted to finish. Actually, after my first two years I transferred out of Mount Holyoke. Most people don't know this because I did graduate from Mount Holyoke.

I spent my junior year at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Because I was done. I was really done. And I did that. I lived in the East Village. It was, you know, it was '68. It was the Fillmore East. It was hippies. It was all kinds of different things. And I'd always wanted to get to New York City. And that's what I did. And it was also extremely important because it was a nontraditional two-year, junior-senior program. And you could either concentrate in social sciences or the humanities. Because I had intended to be a sociology major, after much thought I chose social sciences. I had some of the best young minds of that time. Elizabeth Minnich, who is well known in higher educational circles, was one of my young professors.

And we dealt. That's where I first read Marx, Freud, Weber, Hegel—all them bad boys. I read them all in the original and had wonderful classroom discussions with our wonderful teachers and with the disaffected youth who were my classmates.

I decided to go back to Mount Holyoke for my senior year and I finished there. But I was going to finish college. That had to happen. There's also a little sideline. Are we on time?

ROSS: Yes, I was going to give you a time signal.

SMITH: OK.

ROSS: You've probably got about another minute.

SMITH: Well, there's like a lesbian story involved with that change of schools, too. [laughs]

55:55

ROSS: Well, I'll come back to that because I think that deserves more time.

SMITH: [laughs] Yes.

56:18

ROSS: So I need to ask you, are there other oral histories or books written about you, or stories written about you that we also need to make sure we collect?

SMITH: I've never done a substantial oral history. Actually there's an oral history probably at the best-known oral history place in the country, at Columbia University. A friend of mine [Mary Marshall Clark] was associate director. She may now be the director. I haven't seen her in a number of years. But back in the 90s, when we were still in regular contact with each other, she invited me to speak. They have an annual summer program for people from literally all over the world who come to get trained as oral historians at Columbia. And she invited me to come and speak and do some stuff there. And there's a wonderful guy from Rome who I sat down with [Alessandro Portelli] and did quite a long interview. Now where that is, I think probably the ball was in my court. I think I got a transcript of it. I never did the corrections. And I don't know, I would assume that the original tape is somewhere preserved, given the institution that initially did it. I mean, they wouldn't have gotten rid of it because it would have been precious. But that's about it. I think it was fairly narrowly focused.

And as far as biographies are concerned, a couple of people have told me that they've written biographical entries for reference books that I myself have not seen and they did not send me copies of their articles. I could tell you who a couple of those women are. But that's not really extensive.

ROSS: Have you ever done a Google search on yourself?

SMITH: I don't remember. I know other people have.

ROSS: I did one on myself the other day and was stunned. I didn't know so much of my life was on the Internet.

SMITH: It's tedious, you know, when you have a name like mine, because you have to weed through all the other ones. Did you find that with your name or not?

ROSS: Actually, there's a very famous minister named Loretta Ross. [Smith: Uh huh.] And her biography and mine are actually quite intertwined. [Smith: Right.] I'm sure some people think they're getting one when they're getting the other.

SMITH: Right. Indeed. No, I haven't done, you know, I'm not that into the technology. But that would be interesting. Why did you ask?

- ROSS: Well, simply because it would be a way of locating what's published about you.
- SMITH: Uh huh.
- ROSS: I always find that ninety-nine percent of what was on the Internet about me I had no idea it was...
- SMITH: Oh really?
- ROSS: ...even out there...
- SMITH: Whoa.
- ROSS: ...in cyberspace. Because I had done nothing to put it out there. And when you said about people writing about you and you don't know if you've ever seen it, that brought Google to mind, because that's how I found out that about myself.
- SMITH: And since I'm so not into, I mean, I have a computer that works, thank goodness, now. And I do get on line, you know, when I see fit. But I don't tell people to communicate with me that way. It never occurs to me that that's a big repository of Barbara Smith information. [laughs]
- ROSS: I was able to find almost twenty of my last years of activism, places I've spoken at. People have done just an incredible job.
- SMITH: My mouth is open.
- ROSS: My last comments at this time deal with process. I would like to spend the next 55 minutes, if possible, talking about your sexuality.
- SMITH: Uh huh.
- ROSS: When you became conscious of that.
- SMITH: Uh huh.
- ROSS: And exploring what seems to be a sensitive topic, and that's your relationship with your sister.
- SMITH: Oh.
- ROSS: Yeah. OK.
- SMITH: Yeah.

59:30

ROSS: OK, and that'll pretty much cover the personal stuff.

SMITH: Yes.

ROSS: Then I want to get to the political stuff.

SMITH: Right on!

ROSS: This is not to say that those two things...

SMITH: No, no, no.

ROSS: ...are not political.

SMITH: Right, no. But...

ROSS: But I think they...

SMITH: ...no, I understand.

ROSS: ...form a complete picture of...

SMITH: I understand. And let's...

ROSS: ...who you are. And then we'll get to the political.

SMITH: And let's turn on this fan, please! [laughs]

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

SMITH: I have to say, I'm having a wonderful time.

ROSS: Oh, thank you. So am I. OK. Where we left off I told you I was going to begin to ask you more about your relationship with your sister.

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: And when you found out, discovered, became aware that you were a lesbian.

00:25

SMITH: Do you mind if I mention something that I didn't really say before?

ROSS: Please do.

SMITH: When we were talking earlier I talked about the circumstances of my mother's death, but I didn't really say how I felt about it, although that was probably implied. But it was really the devastating and shaping incident, not just an incident, it was the shaping event of my life. And I feel that so many of the things that I am, probably both negatively and positively, really stem from that incredible loss at such an early age. I feel that I became much less believing of whatever the hype was that people were trying to tell me, because something had happened to me that was so profoundly wrong. I became even more of an I'm-not-going-along-with-the-program person, more rebellious, certainly more angry.

It really manifested itself during adolescence, because even though I described myself as pretty much a goody-two-shoes [laughs] in school, my sister and I really had a volatile adolescence as far as how we expressed our anger at home. I'll say more about that in a moment when I talk about my relationship with my sister and why that might have been the case. But we were by no means perfect teenagers. And in fact, at a certain point that wonderful guidance counselor who I mentioned, in consultation with my dear Aunt LaRue—who had become our legal guardian after our mother died—they thought it would be a good idea for my sister and I to see social workers and to do counseling. And so we did that during quite a significant segment of our high school years. Now high school for me was only three years. It was tenth, eleventh, and twelfth.

One of the reasons I think we made the decision to go to different colleges was because we each had our own counselor at that time who was helping with one of our many issues, and that was how to individuate ourselves from each other and become kind of, you know, self-propelled people. And I think it was a wonderful decision. I will be undyingly grateful to my aunt for being so wise and so progressive. Because black people don't do therapy now, you know, let alone teenagers in the early 60s.

We went to a particular place that was for kids. It was called Youth Services. They did therapy with kids. And it was downtown and, you know, quite a little trek from our high school. Of course we were riding the bus. But the thing is that I just feel so appreciative that she had the insight to find us help when help was needed. And one of the results of that was for us to decide to go to different colleges. So that was a really a good thing. I think there's a kind of sadness that any person who has lost a parent or parents at an early age carries with them for the rest of their life. I don't care what they say or how well they adjust or cope, the thing is it's a profound loss.

A few days from now it's Mother's Day and I was thinking how much I hate Mother's Day because I haven't had a good Mother's Day since I was nine years old. Because I haven't had a mother since I was nine years old. And our family was so wonderful. I remember the first year after my mother died. We were raised in the church, Baptist Church of course. Typical black southern thing. So we were Baptists. And the thing is that Mother's Day is a very, very good day in the traditional black church. And the first Mother's Day after she died, we were ten years old. And of course it's spring and we had our new little Easter outfits and our spring coats. And I remember that instead of our family buying us a white carnation, which is what you're supposed to wear when your mother is dead—our grandmother always had a beautiful white carnation corsage, and we always had red ones because that's what you wore when your mother was alive—you know what color they bought for us? Pink. And it was just a sweet thing to do. Well, we're not going to make the babies wear those white ones and have everybody be asking them, or whatever. And in some ways it was like a great symbolic gesture like, OK she's gone, but you still have this incredible female and maternal love in your life coming from other relatives and other sources, you know, within the family.

But as I said, I feel sad talking about it right now because it's a loss you just can't get over it. There's just no way. I mean, you get through it, you get past it. But there's hardly a day that goes by that something does not remind you that I don't have—I always think of her as mommy. I was so young when she died, I still think of her as mommy. So I always say, Why don't I have a mommy, you know? I used to have a mommy. I wish I had a mommy. That's how young I was. And I still think of her as mommy.

But in any event, as I said, both good and bad things, positive and negative things, come from it. I think my extremely strong woman-identification and also my love, you know, for younger people, including children—I think a part of that is from not having had her as long as I would have wished to have had her. So being around children and babies and trying to help them [laughs], the little knuckleheads—because there are some crazy children, I guess that's the way they are—trying to help children, and I've helped many, at least I hope I have. And I have some very special children in my life right now. I feel like that's the link, you

know. I value those relationships, although I've never reproduced, I've never parented. Even though I've not done those things I do feel that my relationships with younger people, whether they're college age or in their 30s or whatever, people younger than I am, I feel like that's my mother's legacy, too. So, I just wanted to say something about it.

So, as far as you asked about my relationship with my sister?

ROSS: And when you became or became aware of being a lesbian.

07:14

SMITH: OK. Well, let me talk about, you know, lesbian leanings. [laughs] I think that I began to be aware of attraction to women as I hit puberty. Because that's when your hormones are at their peak, I guess. They're causing such great changes in you, you know, that you're just so aware. And I do remember—I love telling this story—I remember, in those early days of black-and-white television, my Aunt LaRue used to love to watch television and we would watch with her. And she was extremely sophisticated. And I always—that was my goal in life. I wanted to be sophisticated like my aunt [laughs], who could speak French and who knew all the movie stars and so many wonderful things. Knew jazz. I learned to appreciate jazz from my Aunt LaRue, because she knew it all, you know. And she had seen many of them [perform] live.

In any event, one of the stories I tell about those early attractions toward women—we would be watching television in the 1950s. Women used to wear those beautiful strapless gowns which have kind of come back, they were out for a while, but in the 50s a strapless gown was just the thing. And I remember looking at these women and wondering, What holds it up? Because I couldn't wear a dress like that. [laughs] So I was wondering, What holds it up? And then I would look a little and say, Huh, it must be those, that bust. They used to call it the bust line, you know, all those euphemisms. And I remember just having this feeling, this kind of pleasant and not very common feeling, you know, looking at the cleavage, the woman's cleavage and thinking, Whoa, that's beautiful. I was a little too fascinated, probably. Who knows. And so you never knew what other little girls were thinking. So you didn't know if you were normal or not. But I do remember looking with great, you know, interest and pleasure at beautiful women on TV in their strapless dresses. As I said, I think I began to have feelings about women, other women or other girls, as a young teenager.

I was not involved with dating or any of the kinds of things that popular teenagers [laughs] would be involved in. So I had my friendship circle of girls. And then working on the school newspaper when I got to high school—that was really important. Now I had a lot of friendships, you know, both boys and girls. But the thing is, I never went on a date when I was in high school. And that wasn't that unusual for someone of my age or of my era, particularly given that I was such a good student. I was extremely shy. I was socially uncomfortable.

My aunt, on the other hand, was incredibly sociable [laughs] and just—she was remarkable. And she had so many friends. And I don't know if you remember those old telephone address books, they were like pads and they were in alphabetical order and they had little notches along the edge and letters of the alphabet and the way you got the number you wanted is that you pressed the tab and the little pad would fly open to the page with your As, your Cs, your Fs, you know, last names. And so my aunt had one of those. And of course it was all very neatly arranged. She was a Virgo. And she was so meticulous and so well organized, just phenomenal. And I would always be like, how can anybody know that many people? [laughs] And she would talk on the telephone to people. She, of course, worked full time. She worked at the main branch of the public library.

She used to worry very much, and with good reason, about my sister's and my reluctance to do social things. And she used to tell us, she said, Girls, she said, you're just so antisocial. And she would talk to us and encourage us, you know, like to do things like go to a skating party or what have you. And sometimes we did do that. I think at a certain point—and she was fabulous—at a certain point she decided well, you know, they don't want to do that. I'm just going to leave them alone. She was so not the kind of a parent who makes you feel like their agenda has to be your agenda. I think because she thought she had this sacred trust to fulfill for her sister to raise us, but she wasn't our mother and I don't think she had a big game plan on the level of, you know, when people are so emotionally involved with each other it's like, I carried you for nine months and you must do this. You know, that crazy fanatical stuff. Not every parent or every mother-daughter relationship is neurotic. But there is something I think about her even-handedness with us, her wisdom and her acceptance of us in some ways that I think may have something to do with both our personalities, and also because she wasn't our mother.

So, you know, she wasn't tripping, in other words. She wasn't necessarily tripping. So we said we didn't want to go to the party or whatever. She said OK, you know [laughs], whatever. And she was worried about that. I think that having an aunt who was so wonderfully outgoing and sociable and charming and all those wonderful things, I learned a lot just by being with her. So even though we were protesting, my sister and I, about going to certain places and doing certain things and just couldn't even, you know, imagine having fun at that, I was watching, I was observing and I was learning. So once I decided, or got to a place where I could come out of my shell more, I actually had a lot of training just from observing her. So I would know how to talk to people like a human being, as she would have said it. That's exactly how she would have said it, you know, You need to learn how to talk to someone like a human being. [laughs] So that was great.

So as I said, the fact that my sister and I did not date was not that odd. Most of our friends didn't either. We were all about going to college and getting our education.

Why did I go to a women's college? Well, there was the factor of these are the best and some of the most elite colleges in the country for female students at the time. And then there was also the fact of the comfort of a women's environment. One of the things I thought to myself at the time was, I know that I'm going to be dealing with racism if I go to any predominantly white institution. So if I go to a women's college at least I will not be dealing with negative assumptions about me because I am a girl. Now, the women's movement—although, of course, the women's movement has never really ended in this country from the first wave to the second wave—it was definitely in a quiescent stage in the 50s and early 1960s. And so when people think that I chose to go to a women's college because I was such a staunch and righteous feminist, I mean, please, read your history books! [laughs]

13:53

I probably didn't even know the word feminist in those days. But I think underlying was this just greater comfort with being with women. I was terrified of the possibility that I might not be normal and that I might indeed be something, a word I probably couldn't even think of. I think I knew the word lesbian. And in fact I'm sure I knew it, because I remember once we had this friend, a wonderful friend of in junior high school and high school who we were very tight with. And she had these two brothers who had been in the armed services and they hung out in New York and went to jazz clubs. They did all these wonderful things that I hoped one day I could do myself. She was a great kidder, sometimes to the point of hurting feelings. And once she was making fun of Beverly, my sister Beverly and myself. I think she called us lesboes. And it was like you branded me with an iron, you know. I was just like, oh god, whoa, that word.

So, it was a really, really difficult time to even have those feelings, because there was no movement. Stonewall happened a few days after I graduated from college. People know, Smith has this history as well. I don't know what the policy was at Mount Holyoke but I have personally met women who were expelled from Smith for lesbian activity, lesbian feelings, lesbian lives, who were a part of my generation. So, as hard as that may be to imagine in 2003, that's what was going on in the 1960s.

Now, as it happened, going to Mount Holyoke, I was surrounded by lesbians! [laughs] Hilariously so. But of course the word wasn't used. There were lesbian students, there were lesbian professors, there were lesbian administrators. I'm not saying the majority. But the thing is, these women's colleges have always been safe space for women-identified women. Some of these women have never been sexual, were never sexual with each other. But these all-women's environments are safe spaces, were safe spaces at a time when there was no other such place in the society. Of course, most women didn't have access to places like Smith and Mount

Holyoke. But on the other hand, there are other all-women places too, like the armed services, sports teams, et cetera. So we find the places where we can be ourselves. As I said, in those days I was surrounded by lesbians and lesbian undercurrents that were not spoken. Some of my friends from college, they turned out to be lesbians. But we never discussed it. They didn't discuss it with me. And those who were actually involved in having sexual relationships during our college years—one friend of mine told me, she said, We were terrified. She said, I was just terrified all the time. And I also want to say though, and be very clear, that I had crushes on other students while I was there.

And that explains why I left Mount Holyoke, that's a part of the reason, besides being very distressed by my experience there—because it was so incredibly isolating. It was horribly isolating. There's no way I could ever say even in a short period of time what it was like to have to live as a young black woman in an environment you, you know—I grew up in one of the largest cities in the country with one of the most significant black populations in the country. I was surrounded by black people [laughs] my entire life. And all of a sudden to go to a place where they've never seen anyone black, in South Hadley, that's where Mount Holyoke is.

We had one black instructor at Mount Holyoke during the time that I was in college. And she lived in Granby, Massachusetts, a nearby town, because there was no open housing in South Hadley. She could not purchase a house in South Hadley. That shows you what was going on in the school at that time.

But in any event, as I said, I had my crushes. They were not acted upon. They were deeply felt. And one of the people that I would now say I was undoubtedly in love with, she did a junior year abroad. And when I looked at the Mount Holyoke situation I said, All this racism, elitism, just downgrading of the human spirit, plus the fact that she's not going to be here—I gotta get out of here. And that's exactly what I did. I've always been really—despite being shy, despite being socially uncomfortable in my early years, despite being neurotic and also insecure, I would say I'm insecure to this day, I guess everybody is—I've always been extremely determined to get done what I thought needed to get done. So you can be insecure and still be very determined. [laughs] And I was determined. I was willing to go to the New School and live in New York City, and that's exactly what I did.

They were so upset because of that attrition rate and people leaving the school and us being considered high risk—they were so upset that they called up my aunt at work, from Mount Holyoke. One day in the late summer probably the dean of students, or whatever, called her up at work and tried to talk to her about persuading me not to leave Mount Holyoke. And you know where she got [laughs] with that. And that just shows how when I get an idea, I'm going to make the idea real. I said, No, Aunt LaRue, I'm going to do this. I want to do this. And I explained it,

explained how I thought I could do this. And fortunately, I had a National Achievement Scholarship, which was transferable. And because the New School was less expensive than Mount Holyoke, considerably less expensive, particularly because they did not provide room and board, I was able to transfer that national achievement scholarship. So my tuition was taken care of. I just had to figure out a way to, you know, survive. And I did.

[discussion of whether equipment is recording]

22:55

Anyway, so I went to the New School and then of course as all junior years must, they end, ours ended. And so my friend came back from where she was. And I said, Well, I think I'll reapply. I actually had to reapply to Mount Holyoke. Because it wasn't an official junior year. I always said I did my junior year abroad in New York City. But the thing is, I had transferred out. The fact that I was able to get out of school in four years is nothing short of remarkable. I don't think it would have gone that way today, but particularly given the fact that at the New School we didn't have grades. It was a non-graded, experimental, out-there curriculum. You took written exams. I think they were take-home because I remember working on them in Cleveland and sending them in and then Mount Holyoke had to determine whether I'd actually done a junior year that they were going to accept.

Well, they did. So I'm back. And I graduated. I don't know what I would have done, well, on two levels, if I hadn't graduated with my class. Number one, generally people went to school, unless they were going part-time, people didn't do six years, you know, the way students do now. I mean that's perfectly normal now. But back then you generally did four years and you got out. I wanted to do it the normal way because I wanted to get on with whatever it was I was going to get on with. And then another thing, I graduated from college in the class of '69. [laughs] If people don't know or remember, that was a euphemism for oral sex. And we also thought it was kind of cool to graduate in the class of '69. So, during those years I was grappling, I had other, at least one other crush as well. But again, they were always just like passionate friendships as opposed to any words spoken. Although I knew, I mean I wasn't deluding myself about what I wanted those feelings to turn into in my fantasies. But the thing is that, as I said, nothing was ever spoken.

I went to graduate school right after college, to the University of Pittsburgh. It was really when I went to the University of Connecticut to start working on my doctorate that issues of sexuality began to be omnipresent again. I was involved with a man for a few years in the early 70s. We met when we were both teaching, actually he was an administrator for A Better Chance program.

I was talking about A Better Chance earlier today. Perhaps not with you. And I don't know if you know about it. It's a program that was started during probably the 60s to take primarily young students of color out of their home environments, bring them to these elite eastern,

usually eastern campuses, although Carlton College was one of the A Better Chance sites as well. You'd get an enrichment program in the summer and then usually you were sent to a private, what they then called private schools. The program still exists. And it was another way of desegregating previously all-white elite institutions. It was also a way of taking the best and the brightest out of our home communities and sending them god only knows where. [laughs] To these boon docks, you know, to be around rich white people like George Bush! [laughs] I actually met the guy who I'm describing at Phillips Andover Academy, which is where the Bush boys went. At that time Phillips Academy at Andover was not coed. It became coed probably shortly after. But in the summer time it was coed and it also had the A Better Chance program.

So I was involved with this guy then. And I guess I'll let this be on the tape. I'll just have to say this. We were together for a few years and there were a couple of dramas having to do with reproductive issues and what have you. But the thing is that I remember once, after we had made love, I got up to go to the bathroom and you know what I was thinking? I was thinking, Hmmm, now all I need is a good woman!

26:50

Whoa! Where did that come from? Did I say that? [laughs] Did I think that? I certainly didn't say it. But, you know, the thoughts were there. So, what was little Barbara going to do with these, you know, these very unconventional feelings, particularly given how I was raised? Because like most people, particularly black people, being queer, being lesbian, being gay, being funny—which is of course the word we used, being a bull dagger, that's another one of our words, being a sissy, that's another one of our words, for males—was tantamount to being a criminal, you know. Prostitute, you know, thief, murderer, all kinds of—sinner, crazy—all kinds of bad things. And I just thought, Oh my goodness. My family did not sacrifice the way they sacrificed so that my sister and I could have the kind of lives they could only wish they could have had, because they loved education and valued it so highly—they didn't do all that so I could suddenly become like, low-life. [laughs] It's really how I felt about it.

But in any event, that was really the dilemma, besides not knowing how to negotiate, you know, the transition, also known as coming out. How could I become a person like THAT after my people have poured so much energy into me being a contributing member of the race. And these are the contradictions that African American and black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people are still dealing with. I mean, I was dealing with it shortly after Stonewall happened.

But people are still trying to deal with this because we have a really long way to go in understanding that there is a huge amount of sexual diversity in all human, not to say, animal populations. And to have sexual diversity and variety and different kinds of sexual expression is just an indication that you're dealing with a biological group. I actually think most people are bisexual and we choose for different reasons. I

think some people are probably exclusively one thing or another. But I think the great majority of people would probably be bisexual if there were no stigmas or sanctions attached.

When I say that the diversity shows we're part of a biological group, I'm not saying that I think the root of non-heterosexuality is biological. That's not what I'm saying at all. And as I also often say, I don't care why I'm a lesbian, you know. People say, Why are you a lesbian? or What do you think made you that way? Blah blah blah. It's just like, who cares? I don't care, you know. [laughs] Just leave me alone. That's all I want. I think that's what most people want. They want to live their lives as well and productively as they can and really to have some peace. I mean we live in a world at war, particularly now, you know. The war in Iraq supposedly ended a few weeks ago but they're still killing people over there. Peace in the global sense. Peace in your heart and in your home, that's all I want, some peace. I don't care if anybody else ever becomes a lesbian for the rest of all time! [laughs] Don't care. I really don't, you know. I'm not about convincing people to be something that they're not. Please don't try to convince me that I am something that I'm not.

I sometimes wonder, because I haven't been in a relationship for quite a while now, are you still really a lesbian? And then I have these little litmus tests that I won't go into right now. [laughs] But the thing is I have these little tests, I go, Who are you watching in that movie? Who did you think was really cute in that movie? [laughs] You know. But anyway, as I said, I think that there's a whole continuum and who knows? Life is long.

You know that thing I said about surviving as a really premature infant. I think one of the reasons that I was perhaps permitted to survive by the universe was so that I could be outspoken around these issues of sexuality as an out black lesbian. I've been out as a black lesbian since the mid 1970s, which was quite a while ago. It wasn't very long after Stonewall. And it was really finding black feminism that allowed me to come out because I needed to meet black women like myself who were out and proud lesbians that made me think, Well, gosh, if they can do that maybe I can do that, too. And that was really key. But I was a black feminist before I was a black lesbian, at least before I was a self-declared black lesbian. And I like people to know that because again, within our black communities, so often lesbianism and feminism are seen as absolutely identical and the same thing. And I really feel that lesbian identity is an expression of sexual orientation. And that feminism is a politic. And anybody could be, you know, a feminist. I think that men most appropriately call themselves pro-feminists. But anybody could really contribute to that liberation of women if they so saw fit to do so. Being a lesbian is like, who you want in your life, who you feel attracted to, who you desire, who you love. And, you know, you could be a lesbian

and not be a feminist. What a terrible situation that is [laughs] if that happens!

ROSS: Be oppressed and not know why.

SMITH: [laughs] Yeah. But there are people for whom the women's movement means little or nothing, you know. And yet they're definitely lesbian. They might call themselves gay women.

ROSS: What has been hard about being a lesbian?

34:00

SMITH: Whoa! Let's see. Well, one of the things about the period in which I came out is that it was the height of lesbian feminism in the 20th century. Going through the papers I have recently gone through, trying to prepare them to be here at the Sophia Smith Collection, I get little glimmers of like, weren't we some kick-asses back then, you know. Wasn't it something when you thought you had found the way, the truth, and the light. There was so much collective and communal excitement about finally coming out from the shadows and out of the closet and not just in the context of gay and lesbian liberation, but in the context of feminism. And so there was an extreme amount of exhilaration. And an extreme amount of energy—let's face it, we were about thirty years younger—so there was just all this wonderful synergy that was going on at that time.

What's hard about being a lesbian? The hardest thing to me about being a lesbian is being rejected by my black brothers and sisters. That's the hardest thing. I mean without any doubt. Because white people were never down with me as a group, you know. So I never expected anything from white people as a group, as far as acceptance, caring, love, support. I expect absolutely those things from other black people and people of color but particularly from African Americans, because that's the group that I come from. So the hardest thing to me is to feel like I don't belong, that that I don't deserve to be respected, that I'm ostracized.

I've never really allowed myself to play into that game or that scenario. And see, that's a good thing too. Because I never felt like, well, in order to deal with this kind of conflict, these two disparate, you know, identities, the only way I could deal with it is to run away from black people and from the black community. It's like, Oh, no, that's not going to happen. You've got to be kidding. [laughs] And so because I have maintained, in a deep way, my connections to other black people, whatever their sexual orientation—and I'm talking about personally but also politically—that has helped me. But the thing is, I know there are many, many places in the black world and in the African American community where I am not welcome.

And let's speak about the black world. This situation in Zimbabwe, you know, it's really heating up now, with people going to visit and trying to get rid of Mugabe and etcetera. And Mugabe, obviously he has

problems. I'm not going to get into what white people want for Zimbabwe right now. But one of the things that we know about him, besides all the other negatives, is that he is exceeding homophobic. He is madly, notoriously and infamously homophobic. So I couldn't go to Zimbabwe and hang out, you know [laughs], at least not without having some concerns. And yet one of my friends in Albany, she is a black lesbian from guess where? Zimbabwe. So, you know, those lies about how this is a natural and this isn't happening, and this is what this means—we have to define for ourselves what it means to be human on the planet and each person does that through their own life individually. And then we do it in groups, too, which is probably called politics and activism. But we also have to define when we are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited and questioning—we also have to define what that means to us as black people. And just really try to help our people along to get some better understanding of the great varieties, you know, of this human experiment and how we can all contribute and play a part.

ROSS: So, I had asked about your relationship with your sister.

38:45

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: So let's close up this hour talking about...

SMITH: Yes. You know, some parts of this would not be for anyone else to see. So, I guess I'm wondering where we should put it, since this other part was something—I don't know how to do that. Or could it be edited that way?

ROSS: Well, I'd like you, first of all, to believe that you can share what you're comfortable in sharing. [Smith: Uh huh.] Because this is not meant to be an exposé. [Smith: Right. (laughs)] I know this because my son is a product of incest, so I have to be careful [Smith: Right, right.] what I put into the public record because I know he will eventually [Smith: Right, indeed.] see that record. And so you know Beverly will eventually see this record. So while I'm not saying to self-censor [Smith: Yeah.] I want you to be comfortable [Smith: Yeah.] with what you say, as opposed to being fearful of what you say.

SMITH: Well, OK, I'm going to try and make it short and succinct instead of going into a lot of detail. Bev's and my relationship, although extremely close and extremely loving, has always been a very difficult relationship. And until recently, quite recently, I never had a full picture or a full understanding of why that was the case. And in recent years, and by recent I mean since, well, really last year [laughs], I now understand that she has a specific mental illness for which she's being treated. And that really, to my mind, explains a lot of the dynamic between us for all of the years of our lives. And that's really about where I'm going to leave it because she, I think she needs to speak for herself about her reality. And how her reality

has affected me has been extremely painful at times. I guess I can also say that there've been periods when she had no contact with me and that was her decision and not mine. So I felt powerless in it. But the longest period was basically the 1990s. From early 1991 through late 1999 there was no contact at all coming from her, although I made attempts. We are now back in each other's lives. And that really is a great source of increased sanity for me [laughs]. And I have to say quite frankly I don't know how I survived. I don't know how I survived without her.

ROSS: So what was this impact on you? Could you elaborate, not on her side but on your side?

SMITH: What was the impact?

ROSS: Tell your story.

SMITH: Well, one of the things, it made me a lot sadder than I ever wanted to be. You know, I talked about the sadness of losing my mother at such an early age. I don't have any other siblings. Everybody who I grew up with and who was a part of my personal emotional landscape for the first eighteen years of my life—virtually every single one of those people is gone, and most of them were gone by the time I was in my early twenties. So that's a devastating reality. All those faces, you know, all those voices, all those people I sat on the front porch with listening to the baseball game and to the late night hours since it was a summer vacation and we could stay up and watch fire flies—all those people are gone.

One of the worst things about not being in contact with Beverly for basically a decade is that she took my past away from me. I love telling stories about my family. [laughs] I just love it, you know. And I think I am kind of a born storyteller. I think that's what writers do. I think that's what black people do, what African people do. We tell stories. In fact, I think all humans tell stories. Even if all you do is respond honestly to, So how are you doing today? That's a story. Everything's a story. But as I said, not being in contact with Beverly for such a long time, the stories got muted. The stories went underground. The memories got blurry because I didn't have anybody I could turn to and say, Do you remember when we went to, what was the name of that person who, when did we first start, what color was that first bicycle? I mean, all of those things, all of those things that make you a human, because you have a past and a present—all of those things got really muted.

And, you know, that thing that I was saying earlier about how despite my insecurities [laughs] or neuroses or whatever they are, that I've always been extremely determined? Well, one of the things that I was determined about as the 1990s went on was that Beverly was not going to ruin my life. Because I thought that if I, you know, fell under this, I could let her ruin my life. I could be so upset and so sad and so, I don't know, just lost and unproductive with this incredible loss, that I could stop being me. And

there was a certain point at which I said, OK, not going to do that. And of course I've been very blessed to have wonderful relationships and friendships with people not just where I live now geographically, but wherever I've lived and also in many other places around the country and even, you know, a few in other countries, too. So the thing is, it's not that there was no human linkage, you know, during all of that time, but there is nothing like a sister and there's nothing like a twin sister.

ROSS: I was going to ask you. Do you think the twin bond made it more acute?

45:12

SMITH: Oh, good grief, yes. But the thing is, of course, I've never had any other experience. So, I know that my sister and I are very close. And there will be times when we're talking about something and like, we're thinking about a metaphor for the situation or whatever. And one or the other of us will say, I was just going to say that. I mean our minds are working in the same way, you know. We're talking about a snowstorm and we're describing it in the same picturesque terms [laughs] or whatever. It's like, wow, you know. And sometimes we actually take a little step back and say, This is kind of strange, isn't it? [laughs] This is kind of uncanny. And then we think of reasons why it would be so. Like, we have the same knowledge base, you know. But there is a psychic link and a spiritual link that we have with each other that is profound.

As I said, I've never been anything but a twin, with no other siblings. And we're not identical. I should say that. We are fraternal twins. But when we were growing we looked a huge amount alike, as can happen with some fraternal twins. And I actually—the younger we were the more we looked alike. So when I look at baby and young kid pictures I actually have to look and say, That's me over there, right? OK, yeah. Yeah. I can tell, you know. Because we're not exactly, but if you saw the pictures—I'm sorry I didn't bring one. [laughs] But if you saw that you'd say, Oh my goodness, is this a trick photograph? Because we had the same little outfits, you know. And we dressed alike into high school, because that's generally what twins did in those days. There was no thought about, let's figure out how to make sure these girls or boys have their own separate identities and lives and we'll start by giving them some different clothes. [laughs] I tell you. I don't know if you're aware that black people have more twins than white people.

ROSS: My older brothers are twins....

SMITH: Really?

ROSS: So I grew up with the twin thing.

SMITH: Are they identical?

ROSS: They are identical.

SMITH: Yeah. [laughs] Trip. I tell you. Did they dress alike?

ROSS: They did dress alike but I have to say that they still, at 65, complete each other's sentences.

SMITH: [laughs] And there you have it. There you have it. The thing is, in their case, it is one mind. They are of one mind [laughs], you know. But in any event, as I said, it's quite uncanny at times. I think you can probably tell how much I love my sister. And I'm going to see her tomorrow. And you know, we see each other pretty often now, living in Albany as I do, and she in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When it's not snowing. In the wintertime distances get bigger [laughs] up here in the North. But it's not objectively, you know, that far away. So we've been seeing each other about once every two months, if not more often.

ROSS: Have you engaged in political work together?

48:25

SMITH: Oh absolutely. Particularly during the early days of the National Black Feminist Organization [NBFO] and the Combahee River Collective. I'm extremely proud of my sister. And I was thinking about how I was looking at something from this women's health conference that happened in Boston in 1975, again working with my papers. And I was remembering with such vividness what an incredibly exciting conference that was. Dr. Helen Rodriguez, later Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias, came to Boston. It was our first time to meet her. We were involved in the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse...

ROSS: Barbara Seaman.

SMITH: Uh huh. And my sister, during that very period when women's health was becoming such an important field and endeavor in political issues, she was getting her Masters in public health from Yale. So Beverly came in for that conference. And I remember it being just exhilarating. And she was very well respected. She was respected because she wasn't just doing women's health on the movement side, she was getting one of those bad-boy degrees, too, so she could do it, you know, professionally. And she made quite a contribution. But Combahee and NBFO, which soon became Combahee, we became independent from NBFO in '75.

ROSS: Well, I'm going to ask you save that [Smith: Sure.] because I want to devote a whole segment [Smith: Oh, sure.] of time to the NBFO and Combahee. [Smith: Right. Sure.] I wanted to just explore you and Beverly's political [Smith: Right] relationship with each other [Smith: Right.]. And we're at that five-minute mark.

SMITH: Right, indeed. Well, the thing is that, you know, we did some wonderful work together. I have to say that the personal estrangement severed that a great deal. But I'm delighted to say that at the present time, my most involved political work is to try to end war, stop war, get some peace for everybody, you know, particularly since September 11. And I am part of a group in Albany, the capital region, which we started following September 11, which is now called the Stand for Peace Anti-Racism Committee, or SPARC. And I'm very pleased to say that Beverly goes to the major demonstrations in Boston, peace demonstrations, that is. So she goes to more demonstrations than I do because we don't necessarily have demonstrations. They're smaller because Albany is smaller. And I definitely don't get to the big ones down in Washington or even in New York City. So she really has been to more demonstrations in the last six months or a year than I have. And she is a member of a church in Cambridge. And she recently attended—they have a peace group there—just this week she went to a meeting with them. And she was at the Boston Marathon where they demonstrated with a peace banner. And she had a sign. And she said, Well, I had the same sign that I've carried to other demonstrations. It said—I love how Beverly said it—support our troops, bring them home. And so, you know, there's those links.

And also one of the things that Beverly and I share—if you can say this is political and I bet you would—is the experience of being black women who were born at exactly the same time and who lived through the same racial history, and that has absolutely shaped each of us. So even if it's not about a group, an organization, a demonstration, we share being black folks who lived a certain experience in the same home, and that we will always be dealing with. I mean, we could say just a few words, or just like uh huh, you know [laughs], and particularly when it's around being black, because we understand that. So that's good.

ROSS: Like when my friend Marvin Gaye comes on the radio and we all remember what's going on.

SMITH: Hey, now it's funny you mentioned that. I hope I can get this in.

ROSS: Yes.

SMITH: Easter weekend, you know, just a few weeks ago. I asked Beverly to come to Albany, not because we were going to church—we didn't do that. The reason Beverly had to come to Albany is because they were showing *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*. And we knew the movie was coming out late last year and we had our consultation about Beverly coming to Albany at Christmas. Should I see it in Boston or should I wait to come to Albany so we could see it together. [laughs] So we were planning.

Well it being all backwards, Albany, of course, I called up the one independent theater where it would be. And they know me there and they're very friendly and nice. I called up the theater, I said, Do you have any plans of showing this movie? And the woman told me, Oh, we have so many movies that are scheduled. If we show it, it will be some time in the late spring. And the way she sounded was, it's not ever going to happen. So I just said, Go ahead and see it Beverly, because it's just not going to happen. Well, she missed it anyway. Because by the time she tried it was already gone from the theaters there.

So a few weeks ago I get a phone call from the same woman I called at the theater. She is calling to let me know they were showing it. I dropped that telephone after I got off with her. Put the telephone back. Picked it up again. I said, Beverly [laughs] you've got to come! [laughs] And so she came. It was very funny. And I organized a theater party. I had nine other people there [laughs] besides me, including two children. So, yeah, we do, we know what's going on, and we were there watching it on the screen.

ROSS: Well, I think that's a wonderful note to end this segment.

SMITH: Yes, indeed.

ROSS: And I appreciate you again. You're so good and clear.

SMITH: [laughs] You know what a friend of mine said about that once? You know how we have friends who've been in recovery and were in recovery—I guess it's not been in recovery, you're still in it. Once I was talking to this friend of mine about how I never really got involved—is the camera still rolling? Who cares. But anyway, how I never really got involved deeply in drugs and or alcohol.

ROSS: Uh huh.

SMITH: And the thing is I was telling her about that. I stopped drinking in the early 80s. And drinking for me before that was a glass of wine once a month or something like that. So I never drank in any quantity. There's certain hard liquors I've never even tasted, you know. So a drink to me was like a Brandy Alexander, those milkshake-type drinks [laughs], Kahlua and cream, you know. But in any event I stopped drinking in the early 80s because it upset my stomach. I have a very sensitive stomach. And the thing is like, my gosh, every time I have like a glass of wine I really pay the price as far as having such an upset stomach afterwards. I said, I don't need this. Of course I didn't need it for many other reasons either, you know. But one time I was talking to this friend of mine who is in recovery about that decision and when I stopped. And she said, no wonder your brain cells are so perky.

- ROSS: Intact.
- SMITH: I thought it was so funny. [laughs] I thought it was hilarious. No wonder your brain cells are just so sharp. [laughs]
- ROSS: That's got a lot to do with it. So, I'm going to check the camera and we'll take another...
- SMITH: A cookie break.
- ROSS: ...a cookie break. A five-minute break.
- SMITH: You're a wonderful interviewer though. I'm having fun. I knew I was going to have fun.
- ROSS: Thank you.
- SMITH: And you know what? I feel like the tone of the second tape is different from the first. I felt it because of what I was talking about, you know.
- ROSS: Uh huh.
- SMITH: I don't know if that's objectively true. But it's a hard subject.
- ROSS: Well, I had a mental picture in my mind of segments. [Smith: Uh huh.] Because I know that as a political person it is so easy to talk about the political [Smith: Yeah.], the revolt and stuff. [Smith: Oh, yeah.] And yet that flattens them out to like, [Smith: Oh, yeah.] you came out the womb having this anti-imperialist analysis. [Smith: Yeah, right. In your dreams, you know.] And so as a person on the other side of the camera most often, I'd rather someone went [Smith: Right.] through the process of how I got there. [Smith: Oh, yeah. Indeed.] Not assumed I just arrived [Smith: Indeed.] as the finished product. [Smith: Yeah.] So that's kind of the middle.
- SMITH: And I look forward to talking about that, too. People often ask, Oh, were your family activists? It's like, What are you talking about? Are you crazy? [laughs]
- ROSS: Most of the red diaper babies I know were hardly worth it.
- SMITH: Well, right. But I also mean there's no answer to that question, there's no understanding of what black life is like for somebody in my age group and what their people were up against, you know. Now if you call an activist someone who's born in 1886 and who lived, my grandmother was born in 1886.

ROSS: Uh huh.

SMITH: And somewhere down in Georgia, they were lynching people, you know, it was a growth industry down there.

ROSS: Well, I do want to tell you more about Fort Valley State.

SMITH: Oh yes.

ROSS: My best friend, her father teaches there.

SMITH: Really?

ROSS: But she's from Fort Valley, Georgia. And that's been their home seat, at Peach County.

SMITH: Wow.

ROSS: And so I'm very familiar with Fort Valley State and Peach County...

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: ...and the oppression that still goes on there. It's also the home of Bluebird Bus Company, if you didn't know that. Almost every school bus...

SMITH: Oh really?

ROSS: you'll ever see in America...

SMITH: Oh really?

ROSS: ...is made in Fort Valley, Georgia.

SMITH: That's very interesting.

ROSS: And so there's so many connections.

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: Which I think there's just something really strange about you and Alice Walker. She's from Eatonton and you're from Fort Valley.

SMITH: [laughs]

ROSS: I'm like, What are they putting in that water down there?

SMITH: Right. Indeed. Well, the thing is also, people have said that to me about Ohio. Because Toni Morrison is from Ohio...

ROSS: Oh.

SMITH: ...and I'm trying to remember. I think Rita Dove may have Ohio connections, too. But that path, you know, there are different states in the South, like Mississippi was a direct path to Chicago.

ROSS: Right.

SMITH: And it's like how the train lines ran, you know? And also the *Chicago Defender* was trying to get people up. And I'm sure that other black newspapers were. I'm really interested to know, since all my people are gone and I could never ask those, did never ask those questions before, I really want to know, why Cleveland? Why did you choose Cleveland? And I can only get an answer to that by looking at the general history of the migration.

ROSS: I think we're missing valuable stuff so I'm going to stop this running.

SMITH: Oh.

END TAPE 2 OF 6

TAPE 3

[begins with discussion of equipment]

SMITH: I only buy disposable cameras. In fact I have one with me, and I was going to ask one of them to take a picture of us together.

ROSS: OK.

SMITH: Yeah, I'd love that.

ROSS: I'd treasure it.

Tell me about the politicization of Barbara Smith. Because no one comes out the womb understanding anti-imperialist politics and [Smith: (laughter)] I've noticed in your writings, in your works, you rarely bite your tongue. [Smith: Uh huh.] You say what you believe. [Smith: Uh huh.] And there's something related to your writings I'd like to ask you, because in studying your bio, which I've done, I've noticed that you stopped writing poetry and fiction in the 1980s. [Smith: Right] And I want to know what happened to that, [Smith: OK] what caused you to do that. But first let's talk about the politicization of Barbara Smith.

00:37

SMITH: OK. Well, I think it'd be really hard to be a person of African heritage born before the midpoint of the twentieth century and not to have some kind of political consciousness about being born into US apartheid. That's where my politicization comes from. I'm sure that it was enhanced by being around a family of what I like to refer to as "race women." And I hope I'm a race woman, too. It's not a term that's used very much at all or even understood anymore. But that is one of the things I aspire to be, a race woman, which as we know means a person who is working—you can be a race man as well—but it means a person who is working as hard and diligently as they can to improve the situation not just of their own family, but of the community and of the race. And there are many ways that one can do that.

But as I said, you know, being born into segregation as I was in 1946, my eyes were pretty quickly opened. And because of accident of the date of my birth—how it made my youth coincide with the upsweep of the black civil rights movement and then the black power, black nationalist movements, the Black Panthers and all that which followed—those were my growing up years. And I think there's nothing quite like people of my generation who got politicized then because it was so real and it was so vital and dynamic.

As I have told others about that question that I keep coming back to, of what did I want to be when I grew up, the most admirable people who I saw were black activists who were fighting for us to be treated minimally as human beings. I mean, when I was born a good number of the public

bathrooms in a place called the United States of America I would not be able to use. A good number of the water fountains, you know. Back of the bus, you know.

Again, because of being born in 1946 I was just old enough during some key events that even if I had a child's understanding of them, I do remember them. So the thing is, I have a memory of Emmett Till being talked about. I didn't know what had happened to him. I knew that my family was quite upset, not to say distraught, about it. I have a memory of the Rosenbergs being executed because again, I told you about my family always discussing, they're talking about the Rosenbergs on the news. They're talking about the Rosenbergs around the dinner table. I'm hearing the name Rosenberg and when I ask, What's going to happen to them, and Why are you talking about them, they would explain.

So as I said, I didn't have an adult understanding or even a teenage understanding, but the names are names that are real to me as opposed to something I read about or would read about in a history book. And I remember the Montgomery bus boycott, too.

The older I got the more I comprehended. So when the Little Rock Nine—it was nine, right?—when the Little Rock Nine went into Central High School, tried to go into Central High School and the white people, you know, just went ballistic, by that time I was old enough to understand more. And I could identify because they were black students trying to go to school. I was a black student going to school, too. So it was just all, you know, of a piece.

The fact that my family had migrated from the deep South—they were very emotionally involved with the civil rights movement, because it was changing the place from which they had escaped [laughs], you know. And my grandmother never identified with Cleveland as her home. She always—whenever she said down home or home she was talking about Dublin, Georgia. So even though she was quite productive, you know, she moved to Cleveland as an elder, but even though she made the best of the situation up there including the ice and snow [laughs], home was somewhere else. It was down South. And all of a sudden her home—the region of the country from which she and her sisters and my mother and my uncle and my aunt had come—all of a sudden it was top news. It led the news every single night for days and weeks and months and years on end. So I was looking, watching and learning.

When I went to high school—first I should say that the church that we belonged to in Cleveland, Antioch Baptist Church, still there, still one of the most prominent institutions in the city of Cleveland. It is generally considered to be, at least at the time we were there and probably still, the most important black church in the city of Cleveland, and you know, there are hundreds of black churches in Cleveland. But Antioch was founded, I think, in the late nineteenth century. Our minister during those years, he came in as minister I think perhaps in the 1920s [Reverend Wade Hampton McKinney]. He was a race leader because, you know, we did

have a couple of city councilmen or whatever, but the thing is that by and large, black people did not hold public office. So he was the go-to person when the white establishment needed to convey a message or get information about what to do about these black folks. And he was highly respected. I think he was a real intellectual. And even though church was really long [laughs] and to my young mind pretty boring, even so, I don't remember a sermon that occurred when he did not talk about something that was going on in the world in relationship to the ethical and moral teachings of the Bible and of Christianity. So my early church and religious experience was all tied up with social justice and with progressive political change. I mean if Martin Luther King had been arrested and was in jail, you know, a few days before Sunday, it was what we talked about on Sunday.

ROSS: But Barbara.

08:20

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: This happened to a lot of people.

SMITH: Oh, OK. OK [laughs]

ROSS: Why did you not just melt in. What made *you* choose...

SMITH: That's so funny. [laughs] That this is a really funny question. Because I always think like, how can you not? The question is why other people had similar kinds of experiences growing up during that era and they contributed not very much to the political improvement [laughs] of the human race.

ROSS: Which is OK. But why?

SMITH: Yeah, but why me? Why did I? I think that I talked about how my mother's dying was the shaping experience of my life. One of the things that her death showed me in no uncertain terms was that life is not fair and that even if you wish for something more than you've ever wished for anything, you don't necessarily [phone rings; tape paused]

ROSS: Let me re-ask the question.

SMITH: Yes.

ROSS: What made you decide not to just melt into society and stand up for your rights and the rights of everybody else?

SMITH: I think I was talking about the profound injustice of losing my mother. And from that, because it was such an injustice, I think that I went into the

other direction of feeling like, OK, I'm going to commit my life to trying to make things better, and to fight injustice. Even though the injustice that I'm talking about was personal and cosmic, under no one's real control, it was just a profound sense of like, that wasn't right, you know, that's not right.

And a lot of other things aren't right, either, you know. I really don't know where it came from because until you said—I know you said a lot of people lived through that era and they were exposed to the same kind of righteous information and righteous, you know, kinds of activism and they didn't become activists—until you said that, it's like, oh yeah, that's right. [laughs] And of course, I do know those people. [laughs] I do know those people. But it's kind of like, how can you not stand up?

I was getting ready to talk about when I was in high school. We had a civil rights movement in Cleveland as well. And its primary focus during those high school years was on school desegregation. Because our schools were segregated de facto as opposed to the way they were in the south, de jure, by law. So, that was a real focus of the civil rights movement in Cleveland. And they were very wise. The Congress of Racial Equality [CORE] was very important at least for my politicization because, for one thing, the executive director was a woman [Ruth Turner].

So as we got more and more involved in civil rights activities, we gravitated to the Congress of Racial Equality, the Cleveland chapter. And who was there as a mentor but a nice young black woman who was a very recent graduate of Oberlin and who really was very kind to us. They were doing some really good, thoughtful work. They also made a real effort to politicize and involve the students who were in the school system at the time, none of whom were any older than eighteen. So these adults actually saw it as being important to get the youth mobilized, much like in the South, around, you know, some similar and some different issues. So they actually were doing that. And at a certain point they called for a school boycott.

One of the things that happened in Cleveland—one of the deaths of the civil rights movement did occur in Cleveland during the period I am talking about. They were building some new schools that when completed would be segregated because of neighborhood patterns. And there was a protest at one of these sites. And Cleveland was really racist when I was growing up. Even though I had the benefit of growing up in a black community and going to a black church, the culture and the kind of ethos of Cleveland as a whole was that it was really racist and really segregated. Very high ethnic eastern European and other places in Europe populations. But more Hungarians in Cleveland than any other place outside of Budapest. And that's not to say they were the most racist. That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm just saying that it had a lot of eastern European ethnic, you know, groups and families. And a lot of Italian Americans and Irish Americans. And everybody stayed in their enclave.

So they were building this school in Murray Hill, which was the Italian section, the well-known Italian section of Cleveland [Barbara Smith adds: I did some research. He was actually killed at a school construction site in the Glenville area, a predominantly Black section of Cleveland]. And they were having a protest. And a young white minister named Bruce Klunder lay down, much like the young people being killed and shot and run over in Israel Palestine at this time on the West Bank. When I heard that story about Rachel Corrie being killed because of I don't know what kind of a...

ROSS: It was a tank that ran over her.

SMITH: Yeah, right. But the thing is, it just really brought back the memory of what happened to Bruce Klunder. He lay down in a construction ditch to protest and to try to stop their work. And the person—just like the guy over on the West Bank or in Gaza, wherever this occurred just a few weeks ago, just like him—he claimed he didn't know he was there and he killed him. And he had a young wife, you know. They were in their 20s. He had a young wife. And it became, of course, a *cause célèbre* and really kicked the movement into a higher gear. His name is down on the civil rights memorial in Montgomery, at the Southern Poverty Law Center. His name is there with the other martyrs, you know, of the movement.

But that was profoundly, profoundly shattering for us and also motivated us to work harder. So, then they called for a school boycott and they actually set up Freedom Schools for that day. And of course, as usual, my sister and I took it perfectly seriously. We didn't see it as a day just to play and to play hooky. The first demonstration I ever went to was the Saturday before the Monday of that school boycott.

And I remember it in some ways as if it was yesterday, because I had never had a feeling like that in my life. And I'm not exactly sure how to describe the feeling. But it was that incredible exhilaration of being surrounded by people who at least for the moment seemed to feel and believe pretty much as you do and care about the same things that you care about. And you're all out there. And you're being really very brave because anybody can see you. You're not hiding and, you know, kind of telegraphing in somewhere. You're actually out there in public. And it was kids. It was a youth demonstration and kids from all over the city came together. And it was just remarkable.

We participated, my sister and I, and it was good to have someone to go places with, as I said, because there was always safety for girls, you know. Boys, too, but particularly for girls. And so we went to do things like that demonstration or wherever we went, we could always go together. There were demonstrations down at the Board of Education. Some of them would occur during a school break or vacation, like spring vacation.

And I remember talking to our dear aunt about us wanting to do that. And she said, Well, do you think it's a good idea? We said yeah. And she

never said, I don't want you to go and you're not going. I mean, if one of us said, or both of us said, I think it's a good idea, she'd say OK. And she'd ask, Who's going to be there? She meant the minister and some of the other people who were the adults so she would know where we were and who would be looking out for us. So it's not like she just said, Get out, I don't care. So she knew what was going on. But she also let us exercise some good judgment on our own.

But in any event, that was really a wonderful and profound experience. Because, you know, I've been to a few demonstrations since that day [laughs]. And at the time, we started volunteering at CORE. Actually did neighborhood canvassing around housing.

I graduated from high school, as did my sister—what a surprise—in January of 1965. And that was because of the postwar baby boom, the schools were so crowded, although in my recent research I learned that Cleveland schools had been having those split semesters long before WWII. It was really about overpopulation and not enough space in schools. So they would start some kids in kindergarten in the fall, as people usually do, and then some of us would start in January, which is not the usual way. So if you start in January and you don't miss a beat you come out in January. And that's exactly what we did.

So when we came out in January of '65 we had a longer period of time [before starting college in the fall]. We got jobs but we also had time to do other things. And one of the things that we saw fit to do was to volunteer at CORE. And as I said, we actually went around with an adult member of CORE and we did canvassing around housing in housing projects, which is really kind of remarkable for somebody who's eighteen. And as I said, because it was the two of us it was, you know, it just felt like it was an OK thing for us to do, you know. We could ride the buses together. We never stayed out late.

But there was this one night when there was a major rally in Cleveland. And one of the guest speakers just happened to be Fannie Lou Hamer. And because of the fact that we were hanging out, you know, with the people in CORE, it was at one of the big, big black churches—not our church but another one in Cleveland—it was also exciting. And because we were known on a certain level, someone who knew us said, Would you like to go to this party that we're having for Mrs. Hamer, and you know, other people.

So that was like my first grown-up party and who should be there but Fannie Lou Hamer! [laughs] And I actually got to talk to her and she was just so sweet. And I knew, of course, who she was before that. But afterwards, when I mean you can't say her name without me just beaming because I actually got to meet her and I write about it in one of the essays in my most recent book because she was so familiar, you know. I mean, she was like the people who were at home waiting for us [laughs]!

But in any event, then I went to college. And of course that was a very different place to do political work. To go from a big, urban environment

with lots of black people and a strong movement to this little place in the woods [laughs] surrounded by these white people, not just white people, rich white people, you know. Clueless white people. One of the things I learned at Mount Holyoke was that if this is the best they had then maybe we weren't in as much trouble as I had previously thought [laughs] because they just weren't as swift as they were supposed to be, you know, as they were portrayed to be. I said, Oh really, is that all there is? So that was an eye-opening experience. But I immediately got involved in a group on campus my first year called the Civil Actions Group.

At that time the civil rights movement—this is '65, '66—was making a major transition, of course, from the politics of nonviolence and kind of, you know, integrationist perspectives to a much more militant black nationalist ideology. So I began college as the civil rights movement was kind of doing a lot of soul searching and a lot of, you know, different formations were coming into being. I remember going to a conference at Bennington College during that period, at which Julian Bond spoke. So that was incredibly exciting and was he handsome, you know. Whoa! But anyway [laughs], I was seeing some of the most important people in the country. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to preach at our church. So I mean it was, it was basic, it was real, it was family. It was the community. It was like life, you know.

And my first year of college—now of course the war in Vietnam was heating up and, you know, getting more and more pervasive and violent there. And because one of my most influential teachers in high school, world history, who then was also my Advanced Placement European History teacher, he was a Korean War veteran, and Irish Catholic. Probably the most brilliant person I've ever met. Certainly the mind that had the most impact on my mind in some ways outside of people in my family. A true scholar. And he really liked my sister and myself and was just wonderfully supportive to us. But he let us think, and not at all like, you must believe what I believe. But I think he was not against the war in Vietnam. And so because I admired him so much, I wasn't really examining where I stood about it. If it was good enough for Mr. Carroll, it had to be good enough for me.

But no sooner did I get to Mount Holyoke and get involved in the Civil Actions Group—they were also organizing around the Vietnam War. And this is the organization, the Civil Actions Group, where most of the really progressive black women, particularly the upper-class women who I so looked up to—this is the group that they were a part of. The coolest black women on campus, as far as I was concerned, were in the Civil Actions Group. And during that first year of college then—I'm almost sure it was the first year of college—I had to reexamine my perspective about the war in Vietnam and I quickly saw, you know, the contradiction of being for nonviolence in the United States, you know, or practicing nonviolence as a political tactic and then for whatever reason thinking it's OK to kill as many people in Southeast Asia as possible. That's not right.

So in any event, I got involved in anti- Vietnam War organizing as well. We had a fast that first year and I participated in it. And I think I was becoming more and more radicalized. These were the years of the Students for a Democratic Society, SDS. We did not have an SDS chapter on our campus but there were those of us who were probably fellow travelers with SDS, who were aware of what SDS was doing, who admired what they were doing and who really wanted to, you know, radicalize and push the envelope of where we were. I went to the one of the first major demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, which was a march to the United Nations in the spring of 1967. That was towards the end of my sophomore year. That was also the demonstration at which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke out against the war. So, as you can see, I had some incredibly formative experiences in contact with or near or in the presence of people who are now historical figures who were generally quite misunderstood. But I actually saw them then and they all inspired me.

ROSS: Can I ask you...

SMITH: I just don't know if I know the answer to your question actually.

ROSS: I think I'm getting a clue. Can I ask you, when did your consciousness around identity politics develop? And do you actually believe that the way forward is through identity politics, given your experiences?

25:04

SMITH: Well, your question about identity politics pushes ahead a few years then to the black feminist years, and to my involvement with black feminism and helping to build black feminism in this country. We used the term identity politics in the Combahee River Collective statement. Again with this odyssey I'm taking with my papers, I was very interested to find an article I had written just for circulation amongst Combahee River Collective members about black women and education. Some members of the group had made some negative remarks about a certain person who was pursuing a graduate degree, namely myself, and, you know, really called it into question and talked about elitism and blah blah blah. Actually in those days I was very energetic and very alert intellectually it seems—I hope I am a little bit still. But the thing is like I actually wrote a seven- or eight-page paper that I circulated to the members of the group. It's over at the [Sophia Smith] Collection right now. And one of the things in rereading this—I'd forgotten I'd ever written it because it was never published—I was really interested to see that I used the term in this internal document, "the politics of identity that we are trying to practice." And that predates the Combahee River Collective statement.

ROSS: So how did Combahee get started?

27:00

SMITH:

Well, it was originally the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization. My sister lived in New York at that time. And she actually worked at *Ms.* magazine, not in an editorial position but, you know, in one of those positions they have for women of color when they want to look like, you know—don't get me started. But in any event [laughs], Beverly did work there which means that she had some access to lots of information, you know, coming out around and about the feminist movement. Margaret Sloan also worked at *Ms.* at that time. And so Bev got the 4-1-1 on this upcoming conference and also this new feminist organization for black women, NBFO, she got the information really early and of course she told me immediately.

And I, of course, was very excited. I wanted to go. I was not involved in the women's movement before I got involved at NBFO because as much as I could understand how women were oppressed and are oppressed because of gender and because of patriarchy, I just couldn't see being and doing political work with predominantly white women or men, for that matter. So there was a period then from the time I finished college and in my first few years of graduate school when I was not really politically active at all, and really despaired of whether I would ever be again, because that was the height of black nationalism and the role for black women as defined by unprogressive black nationalists was a little bit too narrow for me.

So I just thought, OK. Well, I can't play that, you know. I'm not going to walk however many steps behind and have babies for the nation. I don't think so. [laughs] So I just thought, OK, then I'll just be this academic and I'll try to help the race that way. I went to graduate school for the sole reason that I wanted to teach African American literature. That's why I went to graduate school. Could I take courses in African American literature? Of course not. Because it was 1969, 1970, 71, before black studies became a widespread and legitimate academic pursuit. But I really was quite upset—I mean that's to put it mildly—at the thought that I would never be politically active again.

I was actually castigated when I was at the University of Pittsburgh and was still interested in and concerned about the carnage in Vietnam. There was a black studies program there. I was getting my degree in English. And I was talked about very badly for being involved with anti-Vietnam War activities. And really the only thing I did during that period was to go to a major mobilization in Washington, D.C. My first trip to Washington, D.C. was for an anti-Vietnam War [laughs] mobilization. And I think it would have been the fall of probably '69. But in any event, I was really not politically active.

And then with the National Black Feminist Organization, that became my pathway back into committed activism, which has never stopped, you know, from that point on. Combahee, as I said, began as a chapter of NBFO. Some of the people involved in NBFO were people like Eleanor Holmes Norton, Shirley Chisholm, Faith Ringgold, Alice Walker, really,

you know, dynamic people and many people whose names were not known who kept those chapters going.

ROSS: I've heard of Brenda Eichelberger.

SMITH: Yes, exactly. Brenda Eichelberger. I just saw her name. I would not have remembered her name had I not been looking at these papers so recently. But in any event, the national conference was held in New York City and was called the first eastern regional conference. It took place in late 1973. People came from all over the country because that's how hungry we were for something that reflected our concerns. During a point of the conference people broke up into geographic groups. And I remember us being in the stairwell, I think it was Riverside Church. And the Boston people then were in this stairwell because, you know, it was the movement, you didn't necessarily have a suite. So the thing is [laughs]—or even a room! And I remember sitting there and taking each other's contact information and making a list and talking about what we could do and where we might do it.

And that's really how Boston NBFO began. We had meetings—that was late '73—so we began to have meetings in early '74. And there's documentation of some of those early meetings in my papers too, that is time, place, where, dates, et cetera. In any event, in June of 1974, I left Boston for a brief period because of the fact that I had gotten this job as the book editor of the *National Observer* newspaper, which was a *Wall Street Journal* publication—that is Dow Jones, *Wall Street Journal*, *Barron's*, all that, you know, I don't know how the conglomerate fits together today these days. But the *National Observer* was kind of like an ancestor of *USA Today* except that it was a real newspaper. It was actually a real newspaper [laughs] and it came out once a week as opposed to every day. But it was a national weekly newspaper. And because I actually had been in a CR group with white women. It was run by...

ROSS: CR?

33:00

SMITH: Consciousness-raising group with white women. I was the only woman of color in the consciousness-raising group. But I enjoyed it, one of the reasons being that it was coordinated by two women who were themselves therapists. So it had a little more coherence. I later did CR in the context of Combahee, so I know you don't have to have someone who has any particular kind of training for it to work. But my first exposure to it was in a really good kind of environment and good form. So one of the women I met in the CR group who I became friends with, it just so happened that her father was the editor-in-chief of the *National Observer*. And she knew that I wanted to write. And I was beginning to publish by that time.

My first publication in a national or widely circulated place was a review of Alice Walker's book of short stories *In Love and Trouble*. It

appeared in *Ms.* magazine in early '74. And the reason I got to do that is because my sister worked at *Ms.* and she was aware that they had assigned the review to a white woman reviewer who had done a pretty poor job of it and they were not going to be able to use the review. And they needed somebody who could review the book very quickly. And I was teaching black women writers at Emerson College. And I had met Alice by that time because she was in the Boston area and I had actually audited her class, her course in black women writers at UMass-Boston, in the fall of '72. By that time I was doing graduate work at the University of Connecticut but I lived in Boston. And then a year later I swore, after having had that experience of auditing her class, I swore that the very next time I taught, wherever that was—because I already had some teaching experience—I was going to teach black women writers as well. So I was a great candidate for doing this Alice Walker review, which I turned out very quickly. And it was published in *Ms.* It was kind of like one of those Hollywood stories [laughs] because, you know, you go from no publication, because *Ms.* was IT at that time, you know. It was so exciting for me. And I was so productive in those early years.

Anyway, to get back to NBFO in Boston. We had some early meetings. With this opportunity to write, to be the book editor at the newspaper, I left Boston in mid '74. Meetings for NBFO kind of tapered off at that time. But the job at the newspaper really did not work out because I was the only black person there [laughs] except for people who were doing custodial work. So it was really not a pleasant environment. Fortunately, one thing that I always treasure is that the editor-in-chief always stood behind me, you know. He was great. But just like with college, there were white males there who did not think I belonged there. And they didn't really have that many problems letting me know that, either. So I came back then to Boston.

That was really kind of my coming-out route, too. Leave the familiar place, deal more with my sexuality, come back. And I'm out. [laughs] And that's a really hard thing to do too. [interruption]

Anyway, so I came back then to Boston at the end of '74 after a quick six months in Washington. I was also active in the Washington chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization. So when I got back we began to meet again. And I got some letters in the meantime from women who were interested in the chapter. My name and address had been published in another issue of *Ms.* magazine because they had done a story reporting about the first NBFO conference. So they had done some features about NBFO. And then they printed my address. So I had some letters from potential new members, et cetera. So when I got back in late '74 we kind of reconvened and we began to meet regularly. We began by doing consciousness raising.

And we also, because of what was going on in the city of Boston at the time, we got very involved in the trial of Kenneth Edelin [see explanation below]. I remember going to court on at least two occasions. And we were

as supportive as we could be of that. Also the Joanne Little [see explanation below] case was out at that time. And school busing was tearing the city apart. So there was a lot for us to do politically.

[pause while Ross asks deals with noise outside]

38:00

So as I was saying, our Boston chapter of NBFO became quite vibrant during the early part of 1975. One of the people who was most inspiring to me is a woman named Sharon Bourke. And she had been involved—do you know Sharon? She was involved with the Institute for the Black World. And she was a highly sophisticated Marxist. And she also was forty years old and here I was like in my twenties, late twenties. So I just thought, Whoa, she's so old and she talks to me like I, you know, like we're equals. I learned a huge amount from her. She was also a superb writer and poet. So she was involved. Demita Frazier was involved. Beverly, whenever she was available, would come to our meetings, but she was in graduate school at that time. A woman named Eleanor Johnson. Margo Okazawa-Rey, who's now a professor and head of a center for women at Mills College. I just spoke at Mills this fall and saw her. I'm trying to think of these people who were very involved at that time. But in any event we were very politically active in the case, as I said, of Dr. Kenneth Edelin.

ROSS: Explain that case for people who may not know.

39:37

SMITH: Dr. Kenneth Edelin was a black physician, an OB-GYN, who was on staff at Boston City Hospital. Boston City Hospital was the hospital that poor people in Boston—like many cities around the country there's usually a place that will take people who don't have insurance. This was a teaching hospital affiliated with Boston University. As it happened, I lived half a block away from Boston City Hospital. So I was quite familiar with its kind of institutional atmosphere and its impact upon our neighborhood. This was in the South End of Boston, before the South End was as gentrified as it is now.

In any event, abortion by that time was legal in the United States because *Roe v. Wade* had established its legality. Of course local statutes, that is state statutes, could define that legality either narrowly or broadly. So in some places, despite the fact that it was legal—abortion was legal in every one of the states—in some states it was virtually impossible for a woman to get an abortion. And in other places abortion was quite accessible. I guess it was from the time that *Roe v. Wade* was passed in 1973 until today, they had been fighting and fighting and fighting to rescind that. I believe that reproductive choice is so basic to women's freedom and to women's choices and liberation. And there are also ethical questions that I am not so stupid or so dishonest as to not acknowledge. But the bottom line was then, as now, abortion was legal.

He performed, then, an abortion that was legal. And because the anti-abortion, right-to-life forces in Boston were looking for a test case so that

they could try to pull back the legal access to abortion, they actually prosecuted Dr. Kenneth Edelin for manslaughter, despite the fact that he had done a legal abortion. And the way that they got him is that someone who had been in the operating room testified that the fetus had been born live and that Dr. Edelin had done something to, you know, to negate that. So in other words, they were basically saying the baby, fetus, embryo, all these distinctions, but they basically said a baby was born alive and that Dr. Edelin had murdered the baby. And that's how they got him on manslaughter for doing a legal abortion. It was a *cause célèbre*. And it went all over, I'm sure, the country, if not all over the world. And the case was tried, you know, right in Suffolk County Courthouse in Boston. And, of course, the women's movement in Boston became very involved in building public support for Dr. Edelin.

One of the things that was interesting, of course, was that he was black. And it's undoubtedly no accident [laughs] that in racist Boston the test case for—how can we get him? how can we get him?—just so happened to be a black man, you know. And that's what they did. And as I said, they would ask at certain times for us to go to court. I found letters of support that the NBFO—we were still NBFO at that time—that we wrote, press releases, speaking at events. I saw and I have a flyer for an event supporting Dr. Kenneth Edelin and it says at the top, Barbara Smith will speak about black women and reproductive rights as a representative of the Boston Chapter of the NBFO. So we were quite involved with that. And eventually he was exonerated and he, you know, he was not convicted.

ROSS: Tell me about the Joanne Little case.

44:05

SMITH: The Joanne Little case was not as local, but it was an extremely important case for the women's movement around the country and again, it had to do with a black woman. Joanne Little wasn't in Boston. We had a kind of a relationship to the Edelin struggle. But these were both very important things that were going on. Joanne Little was a prisoner in North Carolina, as I remember. And one of the jail guards came into her cell with the intent of raping her. She, I think—did she stab him?

ROSS: I think she got his gun and shot him.

SMITH: Right, to defend herself, and then she ran away. She actually was able to escape. And I think she was found and, of course, again, she was being prosecuted for murder. And what the people who were supporting her and who were defending her were trying to get to is that, when someone's trying to rape you, you are in fear of your life and you actually have the right of self-defense. And that was exactly what the case was about. And one of the things that they needed to prove was, was he really trying to rape her? Well, there was clinical forensic evidence that showed that

Indeed that's exactly what his intention was. And it was interesting again to see in my papers, how they got to that reality before DNA testing and all of that.

I believe, of course, that she was exonerated as well. But her name and her face and the case were a rallying cry for progressive feminists all around the country, but particularly for progressive feminists of color, because we absolutely understood that what had happened to her happens to black women and poor women and women of color in a particular way.

Even before we had analysis of a prison industrial complex which has come to us via our sister Angela Davis and many others—but we have a more sophisticated analysis than ever of how prison and incarceration is this era's version of slavery, you know, for the people they don't want to function, and function with power, in this society—even before that, we understood that about the Joanne Little case. We were meeting with each other. We were doing consciousness raising. One of the things we talked a lot about during that period was the image of black women in the media. Because, of course, there was little positive and little to make you hold up your head and think that you were, you know, an OK person in the world.

Now this gets to identity politics, finally, the question that you raised a while ago. What we meant by identity politics is that we had a right as people who were simultaneously black and female to determine a political agenda for our own freedom and liberation and also, by extension, the freedom and liberation of all the members of our community. We were never separatists. We never saw ourselves as being in opposition to anything except for oppression. So we were against oppression. We were not against people based upon their race, their gender, their sexuality, or their previous condition of servitude. So it wasn't about, like, You're one of those, we hate you.

ROSS: Were you accused of that?

47:56

SMITH: Yes, absolutely. We were absolutely accused of being, I don't know if it was reverse racist but hey, the man-hater thing. That was really who we were supposed to be. Because we were also by that time, a group of several out black lesbians. Not everybody in Combahee was a lesbian, but there were enough of us, and it was a supportive and friendly enough environment for lesbians, and then that mistaken notion that all feminists are lesbians anyway, we got the label and the label did stick, you know. Much to the detriment of our peace of mind but also to the detriment of the people who were ignorant enough to accuse us of something that was really not even relevant to the work we were trying to do.

If we were such big man-haters why in the world were we at a construction site in Roxbury as they were beginning to build a new high school there without the participation of any third-world construction workers? Why were we there that day? And we got the looks, too. I will never forget that that little rally demonstration because it's like, What are

these girls doing here? We know they're not construction workers. What are they doing here?

No, that was our politics. They weren't hiring people of color to work—primarily men at that time in the early 70s or mid 70s, to work on a construction site in a black neighborhood on a new school, public school building, you know—we're going to be there. And then a few years later when a man named Willie Saunders was accused of raping two women in Brighton, which was a virtually all-white section of Boston at that time. As I said, Boston was extremely segregated, just like Cleveland was extremely segregated. Segregation was the law of the land. And hey, is your town segregated today, you know? Has it ended? It really hasn't ended.

But in any event, Willie Saunders was doing some painting work in Brighton. Two white women were raped and he got accused. And we had to stand on principle once we had been informed of the details, you know, of his defense, we were asked if we would be supportive around his defense because the perception amongst progressive women and men and people of color and white people in Boston's political community during that period was that he was being railroaded in the great tradition of railroading black men for supposedly sexually violent crimes against white women. So if we were man-haters, I don't think we would have put our name on and spoken at events to raise money for the defense of Willie Saunders.

But yes, we were accused of many things. And I'm accused of those things to this day. And it's just really tiresome. It's really tiresome. Just because I am a proud black woman, just because I am an out black lesbian, doesn't mean that I have no use for people who are not those things that I just mentioned. Don't think that because I have no problems naming racism, or naming sexism, or naming homophobia, or naming class exploitation or imperialism when I see it—don't think that that means that I can't connect with people who have different relationships to the power systems that cause those great injustices.

I feel like I can work with anybody who is working for justice and peace, whatever form they happen to come in, because it's not about your ethnicity. It's not about your origins, your gender, your sexuality. What it's about is, are you working for freedom and can you be civil [laughs] while you're doing it? That would help. But, see, I can even work with people who are not particularly civil if we're trying to get to a certain place in our continuing struggle for freedom.

But by identity politics—just to get it down for the record, to the future for all time—identity politics did not mean, as it has come to be seen, that we only thought that people just like us deserved to have the goodies. That's not what identity politics meant. It did not mean that we only wanted to work with people who were just like us. What we meant at that time, and you have to understand it in its historical context—this is a time

when black politics were being defined almost solely from a male perspective. [interruption]

So to say, I'm concerned about rape, I'm concerned about child care, I'm concerned about violence against women, I'm concerned about sterilization abuse, I'm concerned about quality education, you know—that wasn't on a black agenda at that time. So we wanted to put it there, you know. And that's what we meant by identity politics. We looked at our situation and we said, OK, at the very same time that we're against racism, white supremacy, job discrimination, unjust incarceration and other travesties of the criminal justice system, we're also against this other list. As one of the early members of Combahee said, and this is Demita Frazier, she talked about how there's so many people who can only hold one concept in their mind [laughs]...

ROSS: [laughs]

SMITH: ...at one time. So you can't really say, OK, got to get rid of apartheid. Because, of course, 1975, you know, Nelson Mandela. Walter Sisulu just died a day or so ago. Oh, you didn't know that?

ROSS: I didn't know. I had a chance to interview his wife Albertina.

54:19

SMITH: Oh really? Albertina. I was so sad to hear it and it brought back memories. But let's face it, in 1975 both he and Nelson Mandela were right on Robben Island where those Afrikaaners and those people who supported apartheid wanted them to be. So you know, we could be against apartheid at the very same time we could be against rape and battery. We could actually hold the concepts together, you know, in our head.

And then the other thing [laughs] that Demita said that was so memorable. She was a great craftsperson of words. She was just brilliant in the short and succinct way of capsulizing something. Talking about the politics that we were trying to build she said, This is not a mix cake, we've got to make this up from scratch. I never forgot it because we all, we loved to cook. I don't do that anymore, just for lack of time or whatever. But the thing is, not only were we doing this political organizing in those days, we were throwing down as far as the kind of—we didn't have refreshments at our meetings. We had meals, you know. [laughs] I mean sometimes we had refreshments but if we decided to have some food, we had food.

ROSS: Well, could you tell me why neither the NBFO nor the Collective formations were sustainable?

55:44

SMITH: I really can't say why about NBFO. I also want to talk about why we decided to be independent, although we write about that in Combahee. I think I mentioned Sharon Bourke. All of us had had experiences in the left. All of us had multi-issue political perspectives. Most of us had been against the war in Vietnam, which meant that we were dealing with anti-

imperialist politics. Almost all of us had definitely been involved in the black struggle and black movements. And because of that we really wanted to have that kind of multi-issue political perspective.

We were not interested in fixing the system. We basically wanted a revolution. And that's what I still want, you know. Nobody says that very much anymore. But the thing is I think we saw ourselves as revolutionaries who were also bringing forth a new kind of political understanding, which was black feminism. And I think that we began to see NBFO as not necessarily having those kinds of radical goals. There was also, I think, frustration at how much we could get—as far as just communication, supplies, materials, support—from a fledgling organization that itself was not funded. So I think some of the frustration was like, how's it benefiting us to be involved with this group, given that it's not like—I'm trying to think of something that would have been very successful—well, say the YWCA or something. I mean, if you started a new chapter or a new YWCA organization, wherever you were you were going to get some institutional support from a very old organization.

ROSS: More like NOW.

58:00

SMITH: Yes. And the thing is that we couldn't get that from NBFO. It wasn't viable or possible. But there was frustration there, which, with hindsight, of course, is very explainable. But I think much more important were the political differences. Now you had a question...

ROSS: About the sustainability of the Collective itself.

58:20

SMITH: Oh, yes. Right, indeed.

I think if you look at political formations of that period and perhaps of this period as well—the kind of grassroots political organizing that both the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective represent—they're not necessarily groups that last, you know, for decades. Because, for one thing, they're radical organizations, and the very nature of anything that's radical—it's a dialectic, it's going to change. Conditions change. If conditions change then it would seem to me that organizations would change in response to them. If you look at organizations from that period—let's say from the late 60s until this period—that have continued, they usually are not radical organizations. What radical organizations do we know of from the late 60s [laughs] until now that still exist in exactly the same form? Now, there's a really huge problem with the left in this country. And far be it for me to be able to say what all those problems are. Because sometimes I just feel like I don't even understand it, you know. [laughs]

But the thing is that I think that the very nature sometimes of sustaining a leftist, a radical and revolutionary stance in the belly of the

beast is that your shelf life, your longevity, may indeed be shortened, truncated.

ROSS: Right. Well, thank you very much. I think we need to rest you and rest your voice.

SMITH: That's good. Because I have asthma, actually. And the thing is that although it's under great control, one of the things that happens or used to happen when I would do speaking engagements...

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

[begins with discussion of exterior noise and equipment]

ROSS: So, what I'd like to do is to recover some more of the family background. I know we're jumping back and forth between the political and the family, but tell me more about your family's class background.

01:04

SMITH: Well, I think that the issue of class and the African American community continues to be extremely complicated. One of the best articles I ever read about that is an article in Darlene Clark Hine's and her other co-editors, her incredible reference work, *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*. It's one of my favorite reference books. I feel like I consult it at least once a week. [laughs] In any event, there's an article by Sharon Harley, I believe, called "Middle-Class Black Women."

And I read this article and I said, well this is so telling because it talked about how, to be middle-class in a black context—a traditional black context before desegregation—often had little to do with income and had everything to do with values. To be middle-class until, you know, fairly recently in US history was to be a Pullman porter. That made you middle-class. And of course, the outside world looks at that and says, yeah, but that's a menial job. But for us that was a big job, you know, and a good job and a stable job, and a decently if not that highly paying job. It was much higher than what most black men were getting.

In any event, after reading that article I thought about my own family, because I've always tried to figure out exactly where did we fit. I know that money and being able to take care of what needed to be taken care of was always an issue, particularly because of the fact that after my mother died, my aunt's husband—they separated. So he also left. So a three full-time employed family income, three incomes got reduced to one in one fell swoop, because they separated the same year my mother died.

I don't know how my Aunt LaRue lived through it. Because when I think about it as an adult woman, I just can't even imagine what it was like to lose her sister and her husband at the very same time. But not only was there the emotional loss, there was the fact that she had to carry the entire family. My grandmother, by the time we came along, she was our primary care taker. She did little jobs, domestic work, for an old family who she had known and worked for down in Georgia, some of whose family members had come up to Cleveland. Those are the kinds of things that she did. She did a lot of stuff with the church. So a lot of things she did weren't paid. And she didn't have Social Security.

I told you how all of my family members, except my sister and myself, did domestic work. So I remember one of the issues was getting them on Social Security, since of course the way Social Security had

been designed was to make sure that black women domestic workers had no part of it. [laughs] So it was really always, you know, a struggle, particularly after the death and the leaving of my mother and my uncle.

But as I said, a strong emphasis on education. We never went hungry. In fact we had wonderful food and wonderful meals, particularly, one of my great aunts was an incredibly great professional cook—domestic work but as a cook for one extremely rich man. And then also she worked at a girl's private school. So she threw down. I mean, we had great food. Everybody in the family could cook. I could cook. When people say they don't know how to cook I think, are you crazy? You must have been spending a lot of idle time in your youth if you don't know how to cook. Every child needs to know how to cook. But in any event, we always had good food.

ROSS: How did you get to college?

05:10

SMITH: Huh?

ROSS: How did you get to college?

SMITH: I'll tell you that in a second. We also, you know, we had great food, we had nice clothes—but there was a struggle. We also had, at times, government cheese and powdered milk in our basement, which was like our pantry. So when people make assumptions, as I said, about what our lives were like, based on what they see in front of them, I always want to disabuse them of notions of our lives of ease, even though in comparison to some black children of my generation we had a pretty nice and stable existence. So, that's what I wanted to say.

We got to college, both my sister and I got complete scholarships to go to college, and that was based on need. And I'm not sure how they make these determinations. I don't think that it was solely based on the fact that our parent was also our aunt. I don't think it was like, Well, she's the aunt, she's not obligated to pay. I think they looked at her income and said, There's no way she can pay. And so both my sister and I went to college on complete scholarships, she at the University of Chicago and of course me at Mount Holyoke. And we also had jobs, you know, on campus, work-study jobs.

We worked often during school vacations. We were good typists because that's what my aunt did, that's what my aunt did for work. So anything she did we wanted to learn how to do. So we learned how to type quite early. And we could get clerical, temporary jobs with temporary office-work agencies quite easily in the summertime but even on Christmas and spring breaks. So what other kids were doing, whatever they were doing during those breaks, my sister and I were working in Cleveland because of the office skills that we had. So I've worked for quite some time.

I didn't have regular jobs in high school, which was really—that was again my aunt being, you know, really understanding. Because whenever she talked to us about getting a little job, her humorous way of making it a very logical suggestion, we would say, Oh, but we have to study, Oh, we want to do the newspaper—whatever it is we were interested in, the orchestra, the band, whatever. And she generally just let us go. And when the opportunity to apply to these very elite schools came, we had everything we needed to apply because we had the extra-curricular activities as well as, you know, the grades and scores.

ROSS: How did you deal with coming out in the African American community, which I think many of us would call homophobic, extremely homophobic, in the 1970s and 80s.

07:45

SMITH: Yes. Well, I'm still dealing with coming out in the black community. I mean, it's never over. It really is never over. It's like finding racism and then finding sexism never ends. You never finish coming out. And I really wish that I could finish with it on some level because it always causes a level of anxiety, particularly when meeting new people. For people who I've known for ages, or in context of which no one would ever be discussing those kind of matters, then it's like, OK, I think could probably just skate in through here, you know. But the thing is that there's always the issue.

I was talking with a friend of mine who I saw earlier today, I was telling her about getting more involved in neighborhood activities. And I live in the heart of the black community in Albany and we are facing what many in our city black communities are now facing, which is an extremely rampant rise in crime, acts of violence, quality-of-life crimes, real degeneration in quality of life in the neighborhood. It was always a black community from the time I moved there in '87, but the quality of life has really gone downhill. And I was telling her about how I've been going to some meetings recently and really just getting more connected in that way, and that I've never done it quite that way before, and one of the reasons was, I'm always afraid that someone is going to say, So are you married? And of course the answer is no. But then what do you say after that, you know? And of course what I've gotten at times is like, Oh, a good lookin' woman like you, blah blah blah, you know. It's just like, Oh, just take me now, Lord [laughs], take me! Get me outta here. I talked about being born shy, being naturally reticent in some ways about my personal business and I just feel like I don't really even want to go there.

But as I said, it has been hard. It continues to be a challenge. The older I get the more I have an I-really-don't-care attitude and also have an attitude of like, I'm not trying to convince you of anything. I'm not trying to persuade you. All I want is some peace. You leave me alone.

I'll leave you alone. And then we can get to the real business here of creating some kind of freedom-loving society.

But there is an incident that I wanted to recount, to give more detail about what that has been like, which occurred really twenty-five years ago this month. It was May 1978. I had written the essay "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," which I feel still is the work for which I am best known. It has been the work of mine that is most widely reprinted, probably most often cited and quoted. It has been translated into at least one other language. I have not kept track of that. But I know I've had requests for translation rights. I was recently looking at the folder, the original folder where the manuscript is, and I saw that one of the first places it was reprinted, and it was published originally in 1977, was in the United Kingdom. So that essay has really traveled.

One of the places it traveled to was to the hands of Bernice Johnson Reagan, who I met at a Modern Language Association convention in December of 1977. They always have their conventions between Christmas and New Year's. So that's just standard for them. So it was in Chicago. I had not met her previously. And I had copies of *Conditions II*, that's the lesbian feminist literary journal for which I wrote "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism." I had copies with me and I gave her one. And as a result of giving her one—she's lived in Washington I guess for most of her adult life. And she knew the people at Howard University who worked on and planned the at-that-time annual National Black Writers Conferences. And she passed it on to one of her friends at Howard who was working on the conference. And as a result I was called early in 1978 and invited to present at the National Black Writers Conference. And I knew about the conference because I had lived, as you know, for a short period of time in Washington.

I met people at Howard and particularly Paula Giddings, who at that era worked at Howard University Press. So it's not like I'd never been to Howard and I think I actually attended a prior National Black Writers Conference. But now I was being invited. And it was really on the basis of Bernice reading "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," which, of course, focuses very directly on black lesbian writers as well as on black feminist criticism. [exchange about equipment]

So I explained—I think the guy's name is James Early. He called me and we were talking. And he read the essay and he was inviting me. So I talk about what I perceived to be potential difficulties in presenting about this subject matter in 1978, twenty-five years ago, to a primarily, if not entirely, all-black audience in a place called Howard. And we talked about it. My suggestion of course, as it always was in those days, was to get other, or at least one other, black feminist writer or critic on the panel. They asked me for suggestions. I suggested Gloria Hull who, by that time, was one of my colleagues and collaborators. We were working on *But Some of Us Are Brave* by that time. And then I also suggested Alice Walker, who I met in the early 70s when she was in the Boston area. But

the thing is I made the suggestions. They did not follow through on them. So I was more than a little bit concerned about what it was going to be like. The panel was in the morning on Saturday. [interruption] So in any event, I was quite apprehensive going in, and I also was pretty fully cognizant of what it was going to be like. The panel was in the morning.

One of things that I did not do, that I of course I never ever made the mistake of doing again—the panel was supposed to be something from like 10 to 12 or 10 to 11:30. And so I was staying—in those days I generally stayed at people's homes because of lack of money—and so I was literally staying in an attic [laughs] room with the woman I was involved with at the time. I believe I came with her. I'm almost sure that I did. But in any event, there we were, and the thing is, when we got ready or we were trying to get over to Howard, we didn't have much time to eat, so all I ate was like some toast and juice. Now generally I don't eat a big breakfast, you know. So for me to really sit down and have a full breakfast—that would have been a departure of my usual routine. But, of course, I wasn't thinking that this was going to go on and on and on and on. I believe it started late. And it did go on and on and on and on. So not only was I dealing with the response to what I had said, which I'll describe in a moment, I was also extremely hungry and feeling [laughs] weakened by the time everything, you know, concluded.

But in any event, it was at Crampton Auditorium, which is a large auditorium at Howard. It was just full. Audre was there. I also made sure—even though they had not invited any people who I knew and could trust to keep my back or watch my back and keep up the good fight with me, even though they had not done that—I made sure that I was accompanied by sisters. So Audre was there. My own sister Beverly was there. Several members of the Combahee River Collective were there and also of our retreat group. So there were people from New York, from Boston, Washington, where I could find them. And they were all glad to be there because they knew that it was a very important moment. We understood the history we were living. And that for an out black lesbian to be invited to speak at something called the National Black Writers Conference at Howard was unprecedented. And I was speaking on the first panel they ever had that focused on black women writers. This is about the fourth conference, and they had never had a panel that focused on black women's literature.

So in any event, I went to the panel. The moderator of the panel was June Jordan, the recently dear departed June Jordan. Sonia Sanchez was also on the panel. I don't believe I ever met either one of them but, of course, I was quite familiar with their work because I taught black literature, loved black literature and taught black literature. So of course I knew who they were, and admired them. And there was a guy on the panel named Acklyn Lynch. And he was kind of like the token male on the panel. And there might have been one other person who I may be forgetting, that person's participation. But that was basically the lineup.

So we did our presentations. I was the last one to speak. And I had written specific additional remarks for my black audience because of the fact that “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” was written for a white lesbian feminist magazine. So there were some things that had I written it for the *Black Scholar*, I would have addressed and done a bit differently. Not contradictory, just like, you write for your audience and to your audience. So I wrote some additional remarks just for the people at Howard. But I read from “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” and I read my additional remarks and then, as they say in the movies or wherever they say it, the crowd turned ugly. It was a free-for-all. Living theater but it really it was more like a horror movie than any other genre. [laughs]

What happened then, because you could feel the tension, you know, you could feel the tension. The panel had gone longer already, and the place was packed, like about five hundred people. And the thing is, you could just feel the tension increasing and increasing. My sister supporters were sitting near the front or on the front row.

Frances Cress-Welsing was there. She was the first person to get up. And what she said was basically—this is a paraphrase, but this is the gist of what she said—she basically said, I feel sorry, you know, for this sister. She was kind of being like a psychotherapist and saying, like, you know, I really feel sorry for someone who has that particular psychological [laughs] problem. She started by pitying me because I was so, you know, mentally diseased, I guess. And then the punch line was, however, Homosexuality will be the death of the race. So that was like dropping the flag [laughs]—I’m going into all these metaphors of what it was like, you know, horror movies, dropping the flag, off and running. The people, the bloods, were off and running. And people got up, they said their stuff. There were a couple of supportive remarks.

But the atmosphere was so hostile. This is the litmus test of how hostile the atmosphere was: Audre did not say a word. And she later said to me, she said, Barbara, I’m really sorry I didn’t say anything. I just couldn’t. Because see, she was a black arts poet and writer. She knew these people. She had hung with these people in the 1960s. And she had particular—what’s the word, ghosts, and just bad memories and bad experiences with her colleagues and comrades in the black arts movement who absolutely turned their backs on her and were extremely hostile and critical of her once it became known that she was a black lesbian. The very same people she’d been down with.

Now there’s some people who never did that. Sonia Sanchez is the highest on that list. She really was a true sister. But as she admits readily, she wasn’t always there. And in May of 1978 at Howard University she definitely was not functioning as that kind of an ally that day either. And I’m not going to really talk about June’s, you know, role in this.

ROSS:

I guess it had to have changed over the years?

21:00

- SMITH: Yes, but let's just say I really didn't feel like I could look for help there, either. And that's to put it in a diplomatic way.
- ROSS: Well, it must have been interesting that she later developed relationships with women.
- SMITH: If I could suck my teeth, I would. [laughs] I never really learned, you know. I always read, I learned a lot about black life from reading literature. And when I started reading about sucking your teeth, you know, and I said, now how does that sound? I'm sure I know how. Well, that's it. That's it. There you go. Anyway. Let's move on. [laughs]
- ROSS: But I still want to stay with that moment just a little bit more. Because it certainly was a turning point in terms of your relationship with other black writers, and identification of allies. I'm certainly sure that's not the first time you've run both into Frances Cress-Welsing and people like...
- SMITH: That was the only time. That was the only time I ever encountered her.
- ROSS: Really?
- SMITH: Yes. Because of where I live and circles and no, I knew who she was. Absolutely, I knew who she was.
- ROSS: The Cress Theory of Color.
- SMITH: Oh yes. I knew who she was. I knew who everybody was. I mean I was in high school and junior high school reading *Negro Digest*, which was the precursor to *Black World*. I don't know how many teenagers were reading the magazine but that's how much I wanted to be a writer and to be a part of that world.
- So I knew who everybody was, you know. I had not necessarily met them. After the panel was over I was devastated. I always describe that experience as a literary lynching. I know we've had other people use the metaphor lynching that we don't necessarily agree with their use of it, namely Clarence Thomas. So one has to be very careful about that.
- But let me tell you why I feel like I can use that term. I saw—there's a person named, what is Calvin's last name? I can't remember his last name, but he was a guy who did a lot of reviewing for New York publications. [Barbara Smith adds: I remember his name. It is Clayton Riley.] He's someone I had known and met previously. And I made my way to the back of the auditorium, you know, really hungry, really feeling weak. I felt like, now I know what the phrase "giving up the ghost" is. Because I feel like if I just thought about it and just let go I could give up the ghost in here, because these people are wearing me out and they're being so hostile. To have that much palpable hostility

coming toward one person and it's like, five hundred of them and one of you, I mean that takes—that's a shock to your system, at the very least. So that's how I felt, you know. I felt completely and utterly drained.

So I made my way to the back of the—it wasn't Calvin Hernton that I'm talking about. [Calvin Hernton] was a true ally as years went on. But the thing is I made my way to the back of the auditorium and I saw this guy [Clayton Riley] and I just shook my head. I said, oh, my God. I said, I can't believe this. I can't believe they're treating me this way. I was distraught. I was distraught, you know.

I've been black probably since before 1946 but definitely since, you know what I'm saying? I mean, please. All we talk about, not putting one identity before the other, but [if] anything defines my lived experience more profoundly than any of my other identities, it's being black. I mean, guess what? We're living under white supremacy. I wonder how I would feel that way? Well, it's true.

I'm not talking about whether I'm more oppressed as a black person. I'm talking about shaping my worldview, my values, the way I move through the world, the way I see the world. And for all these black people at such an incredibly prestigious event as the National Black Writers Conference, at the most prestigious black university in the world—for them to turn on me, I just thought, just kill me now. Just kill me. I mean, I don't know how I'm going to live through this because I was crushed. I was absolutely crushed. What this man said to me, he said, Well, at least they didn't lynch you. Now that's black person to black person. He said, At least they didn't lynch you. And he wasn't joking.

ROSS: That which doesn't kill you, strengthens you.

SMITH: He didn't smile. What?

ROSS: I said, that which doesn't kill you, strengthens you.

SMITH: I'm still here, as you see.

ROSS: Right, so.

SMITH: It was a mess. It was a mess. But that was quite a story. And as you know, I kept on stepping from that. I mean, it is...

ROSS: So didn't...

SMITH: ...it is just as you said. What doesn't kill you, strengthens you. Because one, nobody's born knowing how to struggle, you know. That was a moment of struggle. I came back to Boston after that weekend and my spirits were as low as low as they could be. Eventually, of course, I moved

to another place. Maybe I went to a Combahee River Collective meeting. Maybe we had one of our wonderful meals together. Who knows? But eventually it's like, OK, time to move on. Maybe I had to go to class and teach some of my students some more about black literature. Who knows? But for whatever reason, I had to move on and I continued to be an out black lesbian and write about it, thank you very much.

ROSS: Go, girl. Go, girl. Tell me about the Combahee River Collective and it's folding. And then what was going on with you to make you want to co-found Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.

26:36

SMITH: Well, thanks for asking that question about the ending of Combahee River Collective. We've already talked about it earlier, but I did want to make sure to add that there was a personal dimension of conflict and disagreement that also contributed to the demise of the Combahee River Collective. I'm not going to go into detail about that, but I just want people to understand that any time a group of people, particularly people who are oppressed and who feel so passionately about wanting to change how our lives are, whenever we get up in each other's faces in that way—because we were like a little family unit in some ways, too—there are bound to be, you know, differences and conflicts.

So I just want people to know—some people think they know the story, some people may have heard a bit about it. I generally don't talk about it, because I just feel like the impact of the Combahee River Collective continues to be so positive that there's really little need to talk about the lower, you know, the lower ebbs and the lower ways that we have, the capacity to treat each other...

ROSS: You've titillated me now. I'd like to get a glimpse.

SMITH: Spare me.

ROSS: But because it's also useful as lessons for other women of color who want to form collectives.

SMITH: Well, see, I don't think so. I mean if we were, if you turned off the camera and I told you what I thought was going on, you would see why I didn't want to get into it and I don't even know that there are lessons to be learned. Let me...

ROSS: Oppression.

SMITH: No, not necessarily.

ROSS: OK.

SMITH: Let me just, although to some degree, OK. But let me just elaborate if I can. I'll try to do it as abstractly as I possibly can.

A lot of us were lesbians. And there were points I just described, a situation of great, you know, attack and great ostracism from our black community. We were so important to each other. And, you know, we were incredibly cute. And I think that sometimes, the feelings and the lines between friendship and attraction and love and, you know, possession and all these kinds of things—I think they really just kick things, you know, into a really very turmoil-filled space. The way it happened in Combahee, that was not the only way I saw that manifest itself, because it also manifested itself at times in our retreat groups, which I really want to make sure I talk about as well.

ROSS: What were the retreat groups?

29:45

SMITH: Pretty early in the life of the of the Collective, I think in '77—if we marked the beginning of Combahee from the summer of '75, which I generally do, although I've found papers that indicate that later than that period we were still calling ourselves the Boston Chapter. But we definitely discussed renaming ourselves Combahee in the summer of '75 and becoming independent. In any event, two years later, by '77, we were talking about having our first black feminist retreat. And I can't remember what year the first retreat was in. It was either '77 or '78. But we actually had seven of them as I recollect. And it was an attempt to bring our sisters from different parts of the east coast primarily, but also people traveled from as far away as Chicago. At least two or three women came from Chicago on a regular basis for our retreat. And we would raise money collectively. I don't remember us collecting dues per se. I think we did have a bank account at a certain point, particularly when we were working on the murders. But the thing is that we just basically did, you know, cooperative economics and brought people.

ROSS: The murders?

31:00

SMITH: Right.

ROSS: What were the murders?

SMITH: The murders of black women that occurred in 1979 in Boston when twelve black women were murdered within a four-month period. They were not serial murders, but they happened so close to each other, and the way that they were approached by the black community, which was living under such a high degree of racism, particularly in the midst of the continuing school busing desegregation crisis—the way that the feminist community had an analysis of violence against women and those things—

had never come together. It was Combahee who brought those factors together.

But, as I said, we never really had money. We would bring people—the people we brought from Chicago, we just passed the hat. And as I said, we had seven retreats. People usually came from as far away as Washington. Washington, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston, you know. The Bos-Wash corridor. And we had the retreats in different places. We had a couple of them in Washington. So we didn't always have them in Boston. We had one of them in South Hadley. In fact, I think the first one was in South Hadley at a friend's home who is now a retired professor from Mount Holyoke [Jean Grossholtz].

They were wonderful. We called them retreats, but what they really were intensive weekends. Usually, you know, people would come in on Friday. Sometimes I think we scheduled around a Monday holiday. But the thing is that they were intensive comings together of black feminists to really develop our politics. And it was perfectly serious and it was perfectly frivolous and fun all at the same time. That's when the menus really got insane, you know. Like on Sunday morning breakfast we wouldn't just have waffles, we'd have three kinds of waffles! [laughs] I mean, it was crazy.

But we loved it and we loved each other and we were really trying. And from all of that, black feminism, to my mind, really grew and blossomed. Audre, I had met Audre probably '76. And I invited her, I think the first one was in '77, as I said. It was in South Hadley in the summertime. And I invited her to come to the first retreat. And in some ways it was through those retreats that she and I got to know each other, because, of course, we did not live in the same place. So, you know, they were just intensive cultural sharing. Not only did we, you know, have the political discussion and the topics and all of that, but we also, usually on Saturday evening but sometimes, you know, other evenings of our time together, we would have these incredible, what we called cultural sharing evenings. And you had to take into account that the people doing this cultural sharing were Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Gloria Hull [laughs], you know, yours truly. I mean, it was pretty fierce.

ROSS: Superstars.

SMITH: It was fierce, you know. [laughs] And there was a wonderful musician, I can't remember Terri's last name now. She lived in Washington. It was actually her and her lover's house I was staying in the attic of that time I was down there for that Howard Conference. But Terri [Clark] was in a band called Hysteria. And so she was a fabulous musician.

We had a woman who did belly dancing, Sharon Paige Ritchie. And it was completely serious, you know. She's a black woman who did belly dancing from another people-of-color female tradition, and she'd always tell us about it. She also was a master seamstress. I mean the

most beautiful clothes I've ever seen sewn by a person. And see, I knew how to sew, too, and I was not bad by any means. But I knew what fine sewing was. She was a fabulous seamstress.

And now I'm sure she's, I know she's moved on to do other remarkable things. But Sharon would always tell us about her belly dancing. And we'd always say, you know, we really want to see you do this. And since she lived in Chicago, we would never have had that opportunity. So we had this retreat in New Haven once. And we borrowed people's houses. They would move out for the weekend. We would move in, the whole group of us. And sleeping on floors and in sleeping bags as well, some of us, was not, you know—but just a real grassroots way of organizing. And this is a very nice house. And for some reason I remember the room as being a room that had a very high ceiling. Maybe because it was a town house and they'd taken out a floor or something like that. But it looked so appropriate for someone doing a performance.

And she did her belly dancing. And it was just like, our minds were so completely blown. I had never seen belly dancing in person, of course. But to see someone who you knew, it was fabulous. It was completely and utterly fabulous.

So we did the best that we could. And I think those retreats were extremely important for the sharpening and the further spreading of black feminism in the United States.

ROSS: Has anyone done any documentation specifically on the retreats and Combahee? So that's a book yet to be written?

36:30

SMITH: Well, yes. And I'm not necessarily the person who's planning on writing such a book. People have done dissertations. Most people don't really know about the retreats, because unlike the Combahee River Collective—the reason the Combahee River Collective is known is because we wrote that statement.

ROSS: The manifesto.

SMITH: Yes. And that was published in 1977. And I don't think it's a coincidence in some ways that both "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism" and the Combahee River Collective statement were done in the same year. Because that's the atmosphere. Sometimes it's like, we had the Harlem Renaissance, the white people had their renaissance, and maybe, who knows what was going on with black women, but '77, you know, whoa. And people know about the Combahee River Collective because of the statement and because I was committed even before becoming a publisher to have that appear in as many places as possible around the country and the world. It originally appeared in Zillah Eisenstein's book *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. She knew

about the Collective. We met through a mutual friend. Actually, someone I'm seeing this evening is how I met Zillah. And Zillah was a graduate student at UMass-Amherst, I believe at the time. But she by that time had moved on to being a professor. And she asked, you know, if we would write something for this collection. And as usual we took it very seriously. At the time that the Combahee River Collective statement was written there were only three active members in the group, and they were my sister, Beverly, and Demita Frasier. So it was really the three of us who drafted the Combahee River Collective statement.

And then, as I said, after it went into that book and at the conference we were talking about earlier, the Kenya UN Women's Conference, the preparatory conference that happened in the early 80s—it was going to that conference and coming prepared with copies of the Collective statement that we had xeroxed, that's what gave me the idea to do the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series. Because I said, I'm never going to another conference again where it would be appropriate to have the Combahee River Collective statement and xerox it when I am a publisher involved in publishing. It made it made no sense to me. I said, this doesn't make sense. If we're a publishing company we can at least get this together. Well, ideas, you know—it's not that we were behind or anything. It's just that that experience of being at the Kenya UN Women's Preconference, that's what made me think well, OK, let's do this as a pamphlet.

So the Combahee River Collective statement was a pamphlet. It appeared in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. It appeared in *This Bridge Called My Back*. That was Cherríe [Moraga] and Gloria [Anzaldúa]'s decision. But of course eventually that became a Kitchen Table book. When they wanted it there, it was not published originally by Kitchen Table. It appeared in, of course, *Home Girls*. So it got widespread dissemination. It was published, I believe, in *Off Our Backs*. It showed up within the last ten years or so in *Ms.* magazine as a feminist classic. I mean the thing has legs. [laughs]

ROSS: If I could interject momentarily, because I was part of the black feminist community of Washington D.C. at the time.

40:15

SMITH: Right.

ROSS: And between the Combahee River Collective and bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman*, it was the theory we'd been dying for. Because we were doing all of this work...

SMITH: Indeed.

ROSS: ...but you were explaining our lives to us.

SMITH: Indeed. Yes, indeed.

ROSS: And so I want to appreciate you in this moment.

SMITH: Yes.

ROSS: You know we organized the Kenya conference, the pre-Kenya Conference.

SMITH: Indeed, indeed. And the thing is, I believe bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* came out around that period.

ROSS: '81. I remember it exactly when it was.

SMITH: OK. So that was a few years later. But there were points...

ROSS: We brought bell to Washington to talk to us.

SMITH: Uh huh. There were points when that feeling of being at a renaissance was very, very strong.

ROSS: And Linda Leaks, who you may not remember had just started publishing *Up Front*, the black woman's newspaper.

SMITH: Now, who's that?

ROSS: Linda Leaks.

SMITH: No, I do not remember her.

ROSS: *Up Front*, a black women's newspaper that came out in Washington.

SMITH: I'm kind of remembering the newspaper.

ROSS: But this isn't my interview.

SMITH: Right. But we were in the movement together, so hey.

ROSS: Well, thank you.
 So tell me about both the different types of organizing you were doing but also—again, it was a profound decision to start Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.

SMITH: Whoa, yes.

41:25

ROSS: And you alluded to it but I'd like to know, what went into that?

SMITH: Right. Well, I was involved, as you know, in political activism from high school on. And, of course, I was involved in the black civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement. There was a period of my early days in graduate school when I was not politically active and then I got pulled in, with a mighty sweep, into the black feminist movement, particularly or specifically because of attending the National Black Feminist Organization eastern regional conference in '73.

I always felt like I was a fellow traveler with SDS, and as I told you. I also had read the great, you know, white leftist minds of the 19th century, and was impressed, and of course [Herbert] Marcuse, too, and had wonderful teachers both at the New School and at Mount Holyoke who were themselves, you know, radical theorists and scholars. So, you know, I got exposed. But by the mid 70s I really didn't see myself as just a feminist. I knew I was a leftist. As I said, there was at least one woman in Combahee who was a very educated Marxist. And she was very influential on our ideology. And that was Sharon Bourke. And that meant that, you know, as time went on and to this very day, the kinds of struggles that I have been involved in are very wide ranging.
[interruption]

So even though I'm known as a black feminist, even though I'm known as an out lesbian, I just want to make sure for the historical record that people know that I also was involved in fighting against apartheid, that I was involved in the Central America Solidarity movement—not necessarily on a daily basis, because by that time I had become involved with Kitchen Table, which was a forty-eight-hour-a-day job, not just twenty-four. But the thing is that whatever was going on in this country and around the world that was about increasing the peace, increasing justice and freedom, I was down with that, even if I didn't devote full time to it the way I did to Combahee and Kitchen Table.

For example, I lived in New York during the early years of Kitchen Table, in Brooklyn specifically. And in 1982, there was a huge massive antinuclear march in New York City, which probably was a million people. And we organized both women of color and white feminists who mostly lived in Brooklyn. We organized our own little contingent, which was called the Necessary Bread Contingent. That's a line from a poem that I wrote. So we called ourselves—it was somebody else's idea, I didn't suggest it. They'd read the poem already. Or maybe I brought it up and they agreed, who knows. But anyway, we were the Necessary Bread affinity group or contingent, and we had a banner. And we also organized a wonderful cultural event the Friday evening before the big Saturday antinuclear march. And our cultural event, held at the Brooklyn, I believe, YWCA, was a specifically lesbian and feminist

cultural event around issues of disarmament and world peace. So you can see that we were always involved with many different kinds of struggle. I almost put this [a political button that pictures Amadou Diallo] on to wear today for the camera.

But recently the trial of the police officers who murdered Amadou Diallo, the African immigrant who was shot down like a dog standing in the vestibule of the lobby of his Bronx apartment building, because when he reached for his wallet they swore it was a gun and decided to murder him right there in cold blood.

Who knows when people will be watching this. Anyone who watches it at any time close to today will probably know the name of Amadou Diallo. But what they decided to do, that is, what the criminal justice system decided to do, because of all the organizing and activism that had even gotten to the point of having a trial because they weren't going to try these people. Those people were just going to walk scot-free. They were not even going to be tried. And it was the activism of people down in New York City that got a trial.

Well, once they got the trial they said, Oh we have a bright idea. Let's move it up to Albany where, as we understand [laughs] there are no people of color or few people of color and we don't have to worry about all of the stuff that may happen around the trial if we move it up to Albany. Well, they made a big mistake there, because we organized a committee—what was it called—the Committee in Support of Amadou Diallo I think it was, the Amadou Diallo Support Committee. I can't remember the exact name of it. But we basically led the organizing. And when I say we, I'm talking about my dear friend Vickie Smith and other feminists who we worked together for years. It was a broad coalition of many different kinds of people in Albany. But right in the forefront of leadership were some out black lesbian feminists working around the trial of Amadou Diallo making sure there was a public presence.

So I just want people, as I said, to know. Right now the group I'm most involved in is the Stand for Peace Anti-Racism Committee, which is a group that we started following the events of September 11, 2001. And I won't say much more about that, because it is basically an antiracist, multi-issue peace group. It is both people of color and people of European heritage. But we are doing the work. So that's what black feminists do, tend to do. Now you want to talk about Kitchen Table?

ROSS: I want to talk about Kitchen Table.

48:08

SMITH: Good grief. Good grief.

ROSS: Or good luck.

SMITH: Well, what can I say? I often refer to my gray hairs as Kitchen Table gray hairs. Because it was definitely a situation that could make one's hair turn

gray. And maybe it was just a time of life when one's hair would have turned gray anyway. But it was such a challenging thing to do. A labor of love, clearly, since it was almost entirely unpaid work for me. And it was about a fifteen-year commitment. It was a fifteen-year commitment.

ROSS: What was the period?

SMITH: For my involvement, 1980 to 1995. The way that Kitchen Table began was that Audre Lorde was coming to Boston, where I still lived, for a black women's poetry reading. It was Halloween weekend and she was coming to do a black women's poetry reading with several other black women from New York, including Hattie Gossett. And we were talking on the telephone, she and I, and she came to Boston every so often. She really didn't like Boston because it was so racist. And she swore at a certain point she would never return there. She refers to Boston as "Race-ville," which I think is so appropriate because it has echoes of Sharpeville [South Africa]. So she used to call Boston Race-ville. And she was right, of course. She was perfectly right about that.

But in any event, she was coming with others. And we were talking on the phone prior to her coming and she said, You know, Barbara, we really need to do something about publishing. And by that time I had co-edited the black women's issue of *Conditions V*. It hadn't been published yet, but I was working on *But Some of Us Are Brave*. I had put a lot of my work—almost all of my published work really throughout my career but certainly in that time was predominantly in the wonderful women's periodicals, the feminist and lesbian feminist periodicals that sprung up like beautiful mushrooms during that period. Most of those publications no longer exist. In fact virtually none of them exists. *Sojourner* went under within the last twelve months, the women's newspaper out of Boston.

But the thing is, despite having had those experiences, some of them positive and some of them negative, none of them were women-of-color run. And so when Audre said, We really need to do something about publishing, she was coming from a similar place about why don't we have the means of production, why don't we hold the means of production ourselves? We need to move this further. It was, of course, a brilliant insight to have and comment to make. And I said, oh, absolutely. We need to do something about publishing.

We talked some more and I said that I would get together a meeting for people during the weekend when she and Hattie and I think the other person's name was Carolyn Johnson, but I didn't know Carolyn well. So I know her first name was Carolyn. But anyway, I got a meeting together at my home in Roxbury, and that was the first meeting of what became Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. It was October of 1980.

Now one of the things I cannot remember is if other women of color who were not of African heritage came to the meeting. And I'm not sure

if Myrna Bain was there. Myrna is of black Caribbean background. She was an early participant and member of Kitchen Table. But in any event, as I said, I can't remember if some of the women who were involved early on like Mariana Romo Carona, if they were actually at that meeting, that first one.

But if they were there or not, and as I said, my memory does not serve me, we made the decision from day one that we would be a press for all women of color. And I think that's a really important decision, particularly given that most of us were indeed of African heritage. So that's how our Kitchen Table began. And we made a decision less than a year later—and I when I say we, I'm actually referring to Cherríe Moraga, with whom I was partners at that time. She had moved to California a few months after the meeting I described and she was working on *This Bridge Called My Back* too, which came out in 1981. And she moved to Boston to be with me, and then a few months after she came we both decided that to further the work of starting the press it would probably be a good idea to move to New York City, because that's where the real energy for the press seemed to be. And also, Cherríe did not like Boston. So we moved down to Brooklyn. And I think I know that the clock is ticking so instead of being incoherent [laughs]

ROSS: I think we'll wrap up this session and take a break and then we'll want to come back and talk about International Women's Year and how you became a delegate. The Houston conference, at which the term women of color was coined. All of that on our next tape.

53:35

SMITH: Yes. Yes. How did I do that?

ROSS: Thank you again.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ROSS: OK, Barbara, we've been talking for more than four hours and we've covered a lot. But I want to make sure that in these last couple of hours we cover things that we haven't explored as fully as we could. And we left off talking about Kitchen Table Press.

00:12

SMITH: Oh yes.

ROSS: And so I'd like to start there. Tell me more about the fifteen years at Kitchen Table and what that meant for you. I think what it meant for the movement.

SMITH: Well, I think the reason it's so hard for me to gravitate to talking about Kitchen Table is because it is no more. And one of the things that we said when we first started the press—there was that very important decision about it being a press for all women of color even though most, if not all of the participants [Barbara Smith adds: at our first meeting], were of African heritage, either African American or African Caribbean. And the other thing that we talked about early on—and I can hear Audre saying this—is that we want Kitchen Table to be an institution. And to me, that meant permanent. Not to say forever, but really just—longevity.

Yet there was a point in my life when I realized that I had to move on to other work, because I really did sacrifice a lot of my writing life to the very, very unruly child that was Kitchen Table. [laughs] I always talk about Kitchen Table as my baby. And in fact, I made a decision, in a certain way, not to pursue parenthood, because I was investigating and thinking about that seriously when I first moved to Albany in 1984. And I even had an interview with an adoption specialist, and I filled out the first form you fill out, and I had the second form. But right at that point, which was around 1986, Kitchen Table, which was still in New York City—one of the reasons I had chosen to move to Albany from Brooklyn was it was near enough to New York that I could actually get there—right around that time Kitchen Table was basically going under. Going bankrupt.

When I moved the press to Albany I made the decision not to let it go but to try to resuscitate [laughs] this, you know, this failing little fledgling. And when I brought it to Albany I actually had a teaching job at the University of Minnesota in the fall of '86, so I brought the press there physically with the help of wonderful friends and colleagues, particularly Lucretia Diggs, who I wrote about in the essay "A Rose," which is the concluding essay of my last book, *The Truth that Never Hurts*.

But in any event, brought it to Albany. And then I left to go do this teaching job, because I always had to support myself doing other work

during the Kitchen Table years—which, of course, made it very difficult as well. So I wasn't there on the spot the day that the bank account information came to Lu [Diggs]. But she was there with my friend Vickie Smith who also was very supportive and helpful to Kitchen Table during all the years it was in Albany. She eventually was a Kitchen Table board member. And they're looking at the bank account, or Lu was looking at the bank account statement, the bank statement, and it was less than three dollars. And she said to Vickie, she said, Shouldn't there be at least one more zero here? I mean, it was just ludicrous.

And for whatever reason—I had just met Lu. I just moved to Albany in '84. I probably met her in 1985, maybe even early '86. But she, for whatever reason, she knew about Kitchen Table. She had read Kitchen Table books. She was a staunch black feminist. And she really made a commitment to try to help me save the press, which she did entirely voluntarily. And we also never thought about defaulting on our debts. We tried and did everything we possibly could to actually pay them off. So that was a really incredible commitment. But the Kitchen Table, you know, really was so much the center of my life.

And as you can hear, I made great sacrifices, even personal ones, because at the time, as I said, I had filled out [the form], I had had this interview. I was considering and thinking about adoption, and I didn't really have a wide network of friendships in Albany at that time, either. It would be much easier for me to do that today if I was at the same age—not, you know, almost twenty years older. But the thing is it would be a lot easier because I have some networks of support. It would have been very difficult to do at a time when I knew so many fewer people.

But I also knew realistically that if I were to do it, I would have to leave Kitchen Table, finish my dissertation, get my Ph.D. and get a good teaching job. In other words, have a very different life than the life I was currently living. It would have been worth it, probably, on a certain level, if being a parent had been not—if I hadn't been making a choice between two things.

ROSS: Two children.

SMITH: Yeah, two children. [laughs] Exactly.

ROSS: Now what were some of the concrete reasons the press wasn't viable?

05:55

SMITH: Well, there's the issue of class, lack of class, of race privilege, when you're starting something like a press. I could go on and on about publishing because I learned publishing, you know, from the grassroots, from the ground up. That's the way that most people learn publishing. Because you really don't go to school to be a publisher. Usually what

you do is you get a low-level, entry-level job as a recent college graduate and that's how you learn publishing. And you have an appropriate liberal arts background and you work for a major house or a magazine or something like that, and that's how you get involved.

During the era of the 1970s into the 1980s people were founding independent presses right and left. They were mostly left. But the thing is that many independent presses were being founded. One of the reasons that having a small press—there always have been small presses throughout all of time. The first presses were undoubtedly small [laughs] given that, you know, books were fairly new to the planet.

But the thing is that there was a technology change around that period, which was a change from hot type to cold type, from, you know, type that was set to offset. So the thing is, the change in technology around the period of the 1960s opened up possibilities for independent presses that had not previously been there.

But another reality about independent presses is that they are always generally pretty marginal unless they have a really good income stream, perhaps coming from a source that is not based upon book sales alone. So as I said, I could go on and on and on about the technicalities of why so many independent presses have failed, why so many of the feminist and lesbian presses of that era, and the black presses and all and the progressive and leftist presses—why they no longer exist, although they did such important work just based upon the hard economies of publishing.

Another issue around publishing is the discount structure. Because the basic discount on the cover price of a book—if a book cost twenty dollars, the basic bookstore discount that you extend to a bookstore is forty percent, which is very high. But it is the standard. And then there's something that's even larger than that, deep discounting, which is what the multinational chains can do that independent publishers find very difficult to do. The superstores, the big box stores like Borders and Barnes and Noble supplanted the chain stores. When we first got involved in publishing, it was the chain stores, the Walden Books, the B Daltons. Those were the difficult entities to deal with as far as the economics of publishing. As time went on the superstores supplanted them and they have done a real number on independent publishing in this country.

Some of the presses that were so important—Firebrand, Diana Press—faded earlier on, but it [Kitchen Table] was one of the really groundbreaking presses. I'm trying to think of other presses that were really important that just don't exist any longer. Some of them have changed hands. But there are many other—this is a story that's not only the Kitchen Table story. But because we were a women of color press, we had less.

As I always said, even if your capital is the used car that your parents give to you because they're buying a new Lincoln or a new

Lexus or whatever they're buying, that's capital. If you don't have to buy a new car and somebody gives you a car, then that's capital. And the kinds of things that people who were middle- or upper-middle class and who have white-skin privilege—those things frequently go hand-in-hand in this country—we didn't have that. I think the collective model of running a business—I guess it has worked somewhere. But the thing is, we first called ourselves the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press Collective. Eventually, it became a more conventionally run business, not because I was the CEO and president, but because of the fact that I was the person at the helm who took major responsibility for all that happened at the press.

Frankly, the only thing I ever wanted to do in relationship to Kitchen Table and to publishing was publicity and promotion. I had no interest whatsoever in editorial work, despite my literary background. I felt like, I have left college teaching and grading papers, why in the world would I want to return to a very similar activity known as reading and editing manuscripts? It's just like, no, later for that.

But I just had an innate love and also a really, I think, good sense of publicity and promotion and marketing. I love that. My first business card from Kitchen Table when we were still down in Brooklyn—we had a Brooklyn P.O. Box and a New York City office, and then eventually we had a New York City P.O. Box. Our office was at a church, Central Presbyterian Church at 64th and Park Avenue. And we had these little, I used to call them little rabbit-warren offices, because they were so small, the rooms that we had. They were dotted all over the church. Some of them were upstairs, some of them were downstairs. If the office would open up, then our room would also open up. We would make that our packing room or whatever. So it was really, I guess the word is Byzantine or [laughs] something like that. And it was a very beautiful church. But we had these little tiny rooms all around the church. But anyway, as I said, my first business card when we were still in New York City [Brooklyn], said Barbara Smith, publicity and promotion. And I wished that was the way it had ended because I loved doing it.

As time went on, the other part of being a publisher that I just loved was the graphic design part of it. And I really I learned a lot in that process. We worked with some really good designers, particularly Ann Cammett, who was a young black woman who did some of the earliest design work for Kitchen Table and, as far as I'm concerned, established the Kitchen Table look. Because our books, I think, had a certain look to them, certain design elements. And she was just a fabulous person to work with. And we did a lot of products together, the last one we did was the Audre Lorde poster following Audre's death in 1992. So I loved the design aspect of book publishing. And I also liked publicity and promotion.

But eventually, particularly after moving the press to Albany from New York City, I became the publisher of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. And I literally used to take every speaking engagement that I had—now these were individual speaking engagements, generally on college and university campuses, that allowed me to eke out a living so I could continue to do the work of Kitchen Table and also the work of being a political organizer and activist, and sometimes not enough a writer during those years. But in any event, every single speaking engagement I did in the 1980s after Kitchen Table was founded, I would take not just my books with me, I would take a whole array of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press books. So there wasn't a trip I went on, and it was often travel by plane—there wasn't a trip I went on that I didn't have at least four boxes, three or four boxes with me.

There was a point when I decided, can't do this anymore! Not gonna do this anymore. [laughs] And I just had to let it go. And when people now say to me when I do a speaking engagement, You can bring your books with you, I say, no, I don't do that. [laughs] And I don't really know that many authors do, because you become like a pack mule, you know. I mean particularly when you do the kind of books that I do, like *Home Girls*, four hundred pages long and the *Reader's Companion [to U.S. Women's History]* seven hundred pages long. I mean, please, you know. I'm not going to take those books anywhere with me.

ROSS: What are some lessons that you've learned that you would pass on to an incredibly energetic new group of women of color that would like to do a press?

14:50

SMITH: I would say, make sure that you have at least three or four people who are totally committed for the long haul to the press, to the press's survival. What else would I say? I really don't know what else to say, because this is a very difficult time for independent publishing. The thing that made Kitchen Table Press unique and that I feel is so much of a loss, is that we weren't just a publisher, we were a political vehicle. And we supported our movements, various movements. We got all the information. One of the losses too, to me individually, when I stopped being publisher of Kitchen Table I had to figure out another way to find out everything. Because as publisher of Kitchen Table I basically found out about everything, because everyone knew you could send it to Kitchen Table and whether you got a response or not they knew that we were a political press that was very interested in what was going on, not just in this country, but globally.

The international mail that we would get—the letters from people in Japan or, you know, Sweden or wherever [laughs], Denmark, Chile—was just amazing to me. The letters we would get from people in prison were also amazing. We were an instrument, I think, for progressive cultural and intellectual change. We were not an organizing entity, in

the sense that we were not like a community organization. We weren't working, say, on welfare rights, or that wasn't what we did solely. But the work that we did absolutely was supportive to the progressive and radical struggles around the world. And I loved getting those letters, you know, from an English-speaking woman in an African country. I mean, it just made your day. It made your day to think that, wo, it got that far. It got that far.

But as far as advice is concerned, I guess then the advice that comes out of that is like, try being politically conscious in the publishing that you do and do not rely upon narrow definitions of identity to determine who you publish and what you're interested in. I've always, if you haven't guessed by now, been deeply committed to literature. I don't read mysteries. I think it's fine to read mysteries. I think it's fine to read everything. Because as I said earlier today to you, not on this tape, my favorite magazine is *TV Guide*. [laughs] Because I have a very frivolous side, too—I hope it's a fun-loving side, not just frivolous. But the thing is that I just feel like we have sacred obligations as African people living in the United States to maintain a literary tradition that stands shoulder to shoulder with any literary tradition in the known world. So I just really feel, why would you publish trash, you know, [laughs] when you could actually publish something that would change somebody's life. [laughs] So, that would be my suggestion.

ROSS: Valerie Wilson Wesley might disagree with you.

SMITH: Well, the thing is she writes conscious...

ROSS: Murder mysteries.

SMITH: I know what you're talking about because I just read a wonderful book by a dear friend of mine, Maureen Reddy, about the issues of race and white myth in detective fiction [*Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (Rutgers University Press, 2002)]. I read the whole book. And the reason I read it is because I love Maureen. She's been such a dear friend to me. She wrote me a note. She said, I know you don't read these books but you may find something of interest in parts of it. I said, well I'm not just going to read a part of it, I'm going to read the whole thing. It was a fascinating book, and it actually helped me on an analytical level with issues I'm thinking about and trying to write about. So, I shouldn't be putting down any genre.

But the thing is that we do it, as I said—Valerie Wilson Wesley's detective fiction goes into that black literary tradition that I'm talking about. Serious writing with a purpose, a message and an aesthetic value. That's what I mean by literature, even though, as I said, I really like novels. I like Toni Morrison. I never found her particularly incomprehensible. [laughs] Of course I haven't read every single line of

hers since I stopped being a college teacher. I can't keep up with all the novels I want to read. I often said during my Kitchen Table days, I don't have time to read, I'm a book publisher. [laughs] All I have time to do is like, publish books.

ROSS: Well I want to switch hats a little bit and talk about how you became a delegate to the International Women's [Smith: (laughter)] Conference in Houston in 1977, which was the US [Smith: Uh huh.] version of the World Decade for Women.

20:44

SMITH: Indeed. And that was a fascinating story.

ROSS: How did that happen? Because of course we saw the birth of Concerned Women for America [Smith: Right.], the rise of the right-wing [Smith: Oh, yeah.] backlash to the women's movement.

SMITH: Indeed. I did want to say, before we got off of Kitchen Table, that despite my ambivalence about what that experience was, I do know deep down in my heart that it was an extremely important thing to have attempted to do. I know that the press made a difference in the world. And indeed it has influenced book publishing and the literary arts far beyond the time of its existence, and will continue to do so. So I know that, it's just that I would like it still to be alive. That's all I can say.

ROSS: Do you feel, putting my question on hold, do you feel that we're in the middle of a black women's writing renaissance right now? Because it seems like everything that a black woman wants to write gets published nowadays. I think Kitchen Table may have been responsible for that.

SMITH: Oh yes. And also not just black women but other women of color. When I read reviews, of new books, you know, by Louise Erdrich or by Isabel Allende, by Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Marmon Silko, these are some of the most distinguished names, Amy Tan—when I read about their ongoing literary careers, I think, that's what we were trying to say [laughs], there are some great writers out here! And as they say in those silly Hollywood comedies when a person is talking about their acting career going badly, you know, the joke they always say is, A year or so ago I couldn't get arrested out here in Hollywood. Well, back in the late 70s, early 80s, in relationship to mainstream publishing, women of color couldn't get arrested in New York City [laughs] around Madison Avenue, where all the publishing houses are.

So the thing is that yes, we absolutely made a difference. If I hadn't enjoyed it for most of the fifteen years, I wouldn't have done it, because I don't do things that don't feed me. So for most of the years I was involved it was work I wanted to do. It was extremely hard. I remember being at the post office literally on Christmas Eve mailing letters that I

had prepared asking people to donate funds to us, you know. So it was hard. But the thing is that it was worthwhile work. And I will probably one day make my peace with it.

ROSS: So tell me about being a delegate to Houston. And I haven't let you off the hook about why you stopped writing poetry and fiction.

23:40

SMITH: Oh, yes. We haven't really talked about how I see my writing.

ROSS: Right.

SMITH: And we must talk about that. Well, how did I get to be a delegate. This is a really great story to me. I lived in Boston during the 1970s and was very involved, not just in Combahee and NBFO, but we were with other people in the women's movement who shared the multi-issue perspectives that we did and, you know, were socialist feminists. And we worked with socialist feminists and radical feminists, but most often socialist feminists. And we did a lot of good things.

So one of my friends, who was actually a radical feminist, was aware, as was another friend who was a socialist feminist—their names were Lisa Leghorn and Leslie Cagan, who's still very active, as we know, and a wonderful friend. They had found out that there was going to be a local meeting, kind of a one-day conference in Boston in preparation for International Women's Year, to elect delegates. And they had two. They had one in Boston and then there was going to be another one in Springfield. And because the sisters were so sharp, you know, and on top of it—I remember going to a little meeting at the [Cambridge] Women's Center to talk about this impending day-long conference. Because people were also aware that the right wing in Boston, led by Louise Day Hicks, her organization ROAR, Restore Our Alienated Rights, and the South Boston Marshals—that their plan was to take over the conference. You also, of course, had the anti-reproductive choice contingent. And sometimes, of course, they were the same people. People who were against forced busing and also against the basic right a women's right to control her reproductive life.

So in any event, we knew that they were going to try to stack that electing convention. So we came up with a strategy, which was that we would definitely go to the convention, and we also tried to get as many people who were actual committed feminists to go to it. And some of us decided as a part of our strategy that some of us would run to counter the rightwing takeover at this event. But we had no more idea that we would get elected than that we would be invited to go on the next moon mission or whatever. I mean, it was a political strategy.

So when I said, yeah, sure, you can put my name—because there was a huge amount of antiracist organizing, dialogue, self-interrogation going on in the 70s in the women's movement in the United States, and

there was no place where that was more true than in Boston, where you had the Combahee River Collective constantly holding people's feet, you know, [laughs] to the fire, if I could use that metaphor, to get our white sisters to do what they needed to do. By that time in the women's movement, if you were doing something like figuring out a group of people to run for something or whatever, you would say, And oh yes, we must have women of color doing that.

So when we were coming up with that strategy I said, sure, of course, because I didn't think it would ever turn into anything. So we go to the meeting, I think it was at Simmons College, I just remember being in a big academic space, like an auditorium. And they had breakout rooms too. And so then we get to the part of the day when people were giving little speeches about their candidacy, we could actually present our point of view. And so then they had the voting. And, you know, just amazing to say, some of us would run, including Lisa Leghorn, who I mentioned. We actually got elected! It's just like, Whoa. We just did this so those crazy [laughs], you know, racists and antifeminists wouldn't take over the convention.

I should say, too, that the right wing's desire to undermine and sabotage the IWY process—that was happening all over the country. The forces of the right are of course very healthy in this country, have been, you know, probably since first contact, because there was a rightwing intervention actually to steal the land [laughs] from these people who lived here to begin with. So we can say we've had a right wing as long as we've had this entity that became the United States.

So be that as it may, they were really trying to do this all over the country, just completely sabotage the goals of International Women's Year. So then once we got elected, we have to think of another strategy, because we had not expected to go. People were very excited that there were some genuine feminists from Boston and also some genuine feminists from Western Massachusetts who were going to go. Another person who was elected was Katherine Triantafillou, who is now an attorney. She might have been an attorney then.

And so there were several of us, as I said, who were really very committed to feminist issues. So the strategy we came up with then—and Leslie Cagan was really very much a part of this—was to publish a newspaper that we would take and we knew that there were going to be thousands of people at this conference in Houston. Because it wasn't just elected delegates, it was everybody else who came to the International Women's Year conference, which was probably the largest women's conference that had happened to date in this country, sponsored by the US government and sanctioned by the UN. It's like whoa, that's big. Politics, another matter, you know. But what we were concerned about is, how can we get our brand of multi-issue, grassroots feminist politics, how can we get that out there? Because we're not going to have the big megaphones or microphones, we're not

going to have the access that certain people will have in this forum. We're going to be where we always are, just trying to do the work. So we came up with the idea of this newspaper. And we called ourselves the Lucy Parsons Brigade. Lucy Parsons is this wonderful black Mexican labor and antiracist organizer from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an incredibly stellar person. Actually, from San Antonio [laughs].

ROSS: Right.

SMITH: In any event, we called ourselves the Lucy Parsons Brigade, and put a picture of her on the newspaper. I was talking about the technology of printing a few minutes ago, but computer technology was, of course, nowhere accessible during those days. There was no such thing as a fax. There was no such thing as email. And there was no such thing as desktop. So even though there were some improvements in the printing processes, you had to take something to the printer to get it to exist.

And I will never forget in those days leading up to the IWY conference, I will never forget the rush to get this newspaper finished, and also to raise the money to take fifty thousand or however many copies we took down there. We took tens of thousands of copies down there. And then we had to have a distribution strategy. So we were literally like a little newspaper, you know, like in those old-fashioned movies, you'll see newspaper boys standing out on the corners [laughs], we were doing that [laughs] with our stacks. Yes. With our stacks of newspapers, you know, in Houston.

So we got down there and our major objective was to not have a genuine feminist agenda and a leftist feminist agenda completely buried by not only the right wing but also by bourgeois feminism, you know. We haven't gotten into this, but of course I'm a part of the women's movement that doesn't really get that much play, even to this day, because it's the part of the women's movement that pushes, you know, for the intersection and pushes for looking at how capital and imperialism ruined the lives of virtually everyone on the planet except for the members of the ruling class and a few people who benefit from the crumbs.

The way feminism has been portrayed during the Second Wave in this country is really so reductive of what the actual genuine women's movement is. Not all of us want a good job where we can wear a power suit every day and do vicious things to people from a position of a high place. Not all of us are about that. Some of us are actually more concerned about the homeless woman who's standing outside that damn skyscraper, who that female executive looks past. Some of us are concerned about the woman who takes care of the female executive's children and how she's exploited, particularly if she's an immigrant and or a woman of color.

So we just wanted to make sure that the voice of the voiceless [laughs] would be down in Houston and we did it via a newspaper. And as I said, Leslie was really into it, and Lisa Leghorn. And we were so young and so energetic.

And then when we got down there, well one of the things that was also very interesting that I should mention is that there was a massive amount of black women organizing all around the country aimed at the objectives of not having it be a white-wash event. Because black women still—it was 1977—they had not gravitated to something that was named the feminist movement in great numbers. But we were on the move, you know. *Essence* magazine started publishing in 1970, Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman*, was published, I believe, in the same year. And although we may not have been en-masse members of the official, white-defined feminist movement, we were also on the move. And there were efforts to organize black women from all over the country. I was getting a lot of the information, as were others. We were sharing it with each other. There were so many people trying to mobilize black women's voices at Houston that sometimes, you know, I'd be talking to someone, I said, do you know that there's someone out in St. Louis who's also doing this? So we were doing it all over the country. And we didn't necessarily have a centralized place to know that other people were doing it, too. But we came, we were organizing and trying to get ready as black women.

Now, the black women's organizing often had a focus on elective office and more conventional kinds of political interventions. But, you know, as I've said, I've been black [laughs] since at least 1946 and whatever my sisters were doing, I was involved with and interested in that, too. So I was going to the black women's caucuses at IWY. That's the first time I ever saw Maxine Waters. And I was also going to the lesbian caucus.

And I'm going to finish by telling the story of the lesbian plank in the IWY platform, which was the most controversial plank at the conference. And which indeed—I'll blow the story's ending—it did pass. But I'll tell you how that happened. I was going to the black women's caucus meeting, to the lesbian caucus meeting, and as a delegate, I had responsibilities and could actually vote and could actually be on the floor going from delegation to delegation.

I never had really participated in anything like that before, because it's a pretty traditional form of party politicking. I would say the model was that. But in any event, we were concerned as lesbians—and many of us were lesbians of color—about passing this, because it would have been such a blow to lesbian and gay rights, which were less than a decade old, as far as the movement is generally dated from '69, although people make a case for homophile organizing prior to that. But generally, the modern lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender movement is dated from '69. So, it's 1977. So we're less than a decade old.

ROSS: '69 because of what?

37:45

SMITH: Because of the Stonewall Rebellion. I'm sorry. [laughs] I'm telegraphic. The Stonewall Rebellion at the bar in New York City, where police basically came in to do a raid, as was common practice at that time with gay groupings and particularly the bars. And it was police brutality, but it was affecting gay people who were primarily gay people of color and transgender people. The unknown story of Stonewall is that a lot of people of color were on the front line. But in any event, on that particular night people fought back. It's giving me chills as I'm saying it. Because it was such a pivotal breakpoint in world history.

In any event, it's 1977 then, less than a decade after Stonewall. If this biggest women's conference ever held in the United States, if it had turned down, opposed, voted down the sexual-preference plank—that's what it was called, the sexual preference plank—it would have sent a message around the country and around the world that we were second-class citizens if we were not heterosexual. So it was really, really, really important. And if it passed, it would be an incredible positive message about, here's a movement and a group of people, namely conscious women—whatever they called themselves, whatever label they used—ready to stand in solidarity with sisters across sexualities and identities. So we knew the stakes were high.

I think what we did in the lesbian caucus or lesbian planning meetings, is that we decided that we would draw up a petition that would be particularly aimed at black women. So the lesbian caucus was, I believe, a black lesbian caucus, and we drew up a petition—and this is all done on the spot in Houston—we made a petition and we decided that on the day of the voting on the sexual-preference plank, the black lesbians who were meeting with each other would go from delegation to delegation with this petition to get the black women to sign on to this. It was an organizing strategy to dialogue with people in that context about the issues, you know. They could read the sentences at the top of the petition and then put their names to it. So that was the strategy. And we found some hotel typewriter [laughs] and we appropriated it [laughs]. And then we found the place to xerox, and we xeroxed the petition. So on the day that the plank was being voted upon, I was going from delegation to delegation, as were others. Betty Powell was a delegate for New York City. [Ross: Oh, yes.]

And we were doing this and of course the responses we were getting sometimes, you know, I mean, here was this person handing something to another black woman and saying, Will you sign this petition saying that you plan to support and vote for the sexual-preference plank? It was another one of those moments where you just had to bite down your fear and just do it, you know. Just do it. [laughs] And so we were out there and we were up there, we were running around that floor. And it was

incredibly exciting and also scary. And we didn't know what the outcome would be. And of course, when it passed, jubilation like you could not believe. And we really felt that we had been absolutely instrumental as black lesbians in getting to black women to help support that plank. We felt that we had done that. I think the story probably demonstrates that that we actually did do that. [laughs] So that was IWY. And I got to see people who later came to national prominence, like Maxine Waters, in action. [laughs]

ROSS: That's a wonderful story and it's wonderfully contrasts with Howard University a year later.

SMITH: [laughs] That's right. Well, you know, you win some, you lose some. But I really feel that women—I don't want to seem essentialist, but in the polling, generally women are more liberal and more open and more progressive about issues than men. There is a real gender split around party support and, you know, all that kind of stuff. So, that is another example.

ROSS: OK. Well, I had some questions I wanted to ask you about the whole question of visibility.

42:50

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: Because you're one of my sheroes.

SMITH: [laughs] And you are one of MY sheroes, you know. We can go on about that.

ROSS: When I was a young activist in my twenties, groping for understanding, [Smith: Uh, huh.] your writings were very important to me.

SMITH: Well, thank you. I really appreciate that.

ROSS: And you helped build movement with what you were writing. But I've always felt, certainly in the twenty or thirty years that I've been active, that there were some people who rose to prominence and fame, probably cause they had good publicists, not because they were particularly deep thinkers.

SMITH: Yeah, right. [laughs] Let's talk about deep thinkers.

ROSS: [laughs] And there were some people who had an unmarked impact. [Smith: Uh huh.] And in some ways, I've always felt that your visibility wasn't all it could be. And if I'm feeling that, and I only know...

SMITH: ...the tip of the iceberg of it.

ROSS: How does that affect you? Because...

SMITH: Whoa.

ROSS: ...I think you should be up there. I see people on talk shows talking about black women's issues, when I happen to know five years ago, they couldn't spell the word feminism.

SMITH: Well, well, well.

ROSS: So how does that affect you?

44:10

SMITH: Well, I'm so glad you brought this up because it is one of my hobby-horse topics at this time of my life. I'm fifty-six. I will be fifty-seven in November. So one has to begin to assess, when you're in my age group, you know. It's not that I don't plan to be here for a little while longer. But, of course, we make no plans around that. We can just do what we can do and then, you know, the goddesses decide. But the thing our nature decides, which is the same thing essentially as saying the goddesses—I'm not a goddess worshipper, I should add. [laughs] I'm a big atheist, too. A big heathen. And if you want to know more about that, send me a postcard. [laughs]

In any event, as I said, you do begin to assess when you're in my age group and you have something to look back upon. And I constantly talk about, at this time in my life, that feeling of being marginalized and how painful it is to me. All the things you said I think are true. Whenever I get really down—now here's a perfect example of me being marginalized.

You know the little essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" that we talked about. I kind of know—I taught one of the earliest black women writers courses in the country, following auditing Alice Walker in '72. Fall of '73, I was teaching my own at Emerson College in Boston. And so, I actually know a little bit about black women writers.

So there is this major black women writer's conference in New York City just a few years ago. It was at NYU. And guess who was not invited. They did not invite me. And I found out about the conference. I was so upset. What I got in the mail was the kind of thing you send to a member of the general public who may have an interest in the subject matter. That's what I got. So I got like, if you want to register at the conference, here's [laughs] here's how you do it! And I said, I cannot believe this. I also—if memory serves correctly and I'm pretty sure that this is the case because it wasn't that long ago—I was not invited to the Black Women in the Academy conference, either, to present. And the book is called *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men*,

[laughs] *But Some of us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. But the person who came up with that title and who conceived of the project—because I conceived of that book by myself and then Gloria Hull, now Akasha Hull, and Patricia Bell Scott, they came on after it was already under way. And it was my—that title is my title. It was a title I had used for a presentation of the same name. And when I was searching around for a title, Cherríe, who was at that time in Boston and we were living together and I was searching around and she said, What about this one, Barbara, she said, All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies. She said, That's a great title for the book. We had to fight tooth and nail for it.

But in any event, the person who did those things didn't get invited to the Black Women in the Academy conference. A dear friend of mine in Albany, Naomi Jaffe, who was one of the people I admire most politically in the world, a person who I learn from on a regular basis, when I told her about not getting invited to the NYU black women writer's conference she said, Barbara, you have to understand, it's your politics! [laughs]

And then we laughed, you know, sometimes pretty bitterly. But we laugh because it's a lethal combination, you know. I'm a black woman. And I'm a pro-black black woman. I am a feminist. I'm an out lesbian. And I am a card-carrying socialist. I mean, I believe in revolution, you know. I believe we have got to get this yoke of super-exploitative economic greed off of our back. I believe that, you know. I see our economic system wracking ruin all over the [laughs] country, all over the globe. What was the war against Iraq about that is the latest version of that, the 2003 version? You know, not oil, not just implicitly, but it's about empire.

So as I said, my politics, they're my politics. I think it's too much for people to handle. They might be able to handle one or two, or even possibly three, of those identities. But when you add on the fact that I'm also a leftist at a time when being a member of the ACLU [laughs] makes you a raving lunatic red, you know—the ACLU?! I mean I'm so far to the left of that, it's not even funny. When I say I'm a leftist, I'm not talking about violence. I'm not a nut. But the thing is, the combination of all those political commitments, those identities, this makes people, I think, stay away, you know, like I have some kind of communicable illness.

And that illness would be lesbianism, of course. [laughs] Don't want to catch that! But there's also the fact that I've always done my work in a grassroots way. Although I've had dreams, still have, dreams of recognition for the work that I do, my primary motivation was never careerism. Whatever I did, it was always about the struggle and the struggle for justice, as opposed to, now how can I leverage myself into this place where people will think this about me, you know. It's not about that, please.

And my role models—you didn't ask me about who they are, but they are people like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker and the people in my family [laughs] from Dublin, Georgia, you know. I mean people who have a stellar integrity and ethics, who were so committed to freeing humanity that they gave their lives for struggle. Those are my role models.

And I often cringe when I read about how those two women in particular, spent their last days. They were impoverished. And I worry about that. And I'm as near to that as I've ever been in my life. Might as well say it. By the time people watch it, it'll be a closed book. Won't have to worry about money fifty years from now. [laughs] Sometimes that's what I tell myself. I say, well, you're going crazy trying to figure out how to pay your bills or what to do. But fifty years from now, [laughs] you won't be worried about money [laughs] or anything else, you know. But the thing is it's really hard, it's been hard. And it's hard to feel invisible. It really is.

ROSS: It has to hurt because...

51:48

SMITH: Oh, of course it does.

ROSS: ...in many ways it has to represent a lack of appreciation by the women who are most important to you, other black women.

SMITH: Huh.

ROSS: If the white world were doing it to you...

SMITH: Uh huh.

ROSS: ...you could probably care less.

SMITH: The two examples I gave were the most hurtful ones. You know, the white LGBT people, I don't care if I ever see them again, which may sound strange. I'm talking about the mainstream lesbian/gay political establishment, which really doesn't have too much use for bisexual or transgendered people. So when I say lesbian and gay, I mean that. And when I use the term historically as I was a few minutes ago, talking about the movement, that's what the movement was called then. So to call it the LGBT movement, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender movement, talking about the 70s, that wasn't what it was called then. So I'm just trying to be accurate. But the thing is, the white lesbian/gay power establishment, they had no use for me and it's kind of reciprocal. I'm not saying that no white lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered person appreciates my work. But that movement has grown more and more conservative as time has gone on.

ROSS: I want to ask you about that. Tell me about that and why you think that's happening.

53:05

SMITH: I just want to conclude this thing about marginalization. We were talking about how it is hurtful. I often think that when I think about my life and my career, I think that, well, maybe it's not about here and now. Maybe it's about the future. And so I just hope, this is a means towards that, I just hope that one day somebody will see the video, you know, the oral history that we are conducting now, will go through the papers and they'll say, Whoa! that was some really fascinating stuff. She was a kind of interesting person. [laughs] I'd like to know more about that.

ROSS: You'll get discovered like Zora got discovered.

SMITH: Exactly! Zora's on a postage stamp now. I mean, what? It's just like, Whoa. When I go into the post office I think, nobody knows that the person standing here in front of them is one of the people who got her on that postage stamp. Yes indeed, you know. Again, I don't necessarily get the credit. But when I was introduced to her work, really in that Alice Walker course that I audited, I was just thinking this morning about the person who lost my copy, my first copy of the of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because that book was out of print for a long time. And I had one of the last available copies from the early 70s. It was a little Fawcett paperback, if I remember correctly. And it was heavily annotated because of course I was teaching at that time so all of my books that I used for teaching or for researching or writing, they're very precious just on the basis of the notes that are written in them. They become unique to me. And, of course, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a jewel. And don't you know, this heifer lost my book. And not only did she lose my book, she went on to lose my dictionary. And I said, you know, she was really telling me something [laughs]. You lose *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it's not available anywhere in print. Nellie McKay actually made me a xerox copy of her book so I could have something after this woman lost it. And then she loses my dictionary. It's just like, Whoa. But in any event, yeah.

You know, we did as much as we could, when we could. As my dear Aunt LaRue used to say, Give me my roses when I'm living. A lot of black women have said that. Because so often it doesn't happen. But I've gotten many, many wonderful responses and benefits of being a public person doing public work for fundamental political, social and economic change. I've gotten many, many benefits. I couldn't even list all of them. They are not monetary. [laughs] And they are not about access to establishment power.

56:13

ROSS: So what would you do differently if you could know what you know now, and if life had an undo button, like our computers...

SMITH: Oh, the undo button. Hmmm. What would I do differently? Virtually nothing. I can't think of anything I would do differently. Now, of course, it's getting later in the afternoon and I'm not as sharp as I was when we first started yesterday. But I really don't have a huge number of regrets. Because every decision you make, it's like that saying, if you kill a butterfly in the rain forest, rivers stop running and [laughs] all these things happen, you know. The ecology of the planet is affected by an attack on any little part of the planet. I feel the same way about life. Any decision you make or unmake or undo it changes the course of history and of your own life. One of my jokes about going to Mount Holyoke and graduating in 1969, one of my jokes is, you know, I could have been one of the first buppies on the planet.

ROSS: Buppie?

57:27

SMITH: Oh, buppie, sorry. A black urban professional, yeah, because yuppies were young urban professionals, presumably white. [laughs] Buppies were the black version of that and it was very satirical. It was an 80s thing, you know. But the thing is that I could have been one of the first buppies on the planet because I had such a wonderful education. And if I'd come out of Mount Holyoke and looked around and said, hmmm, money, gotta get me some of that [laughs], then I think I would be sitting in some suite somewhere in a suit. Might have a drinking problem, [laughs], who knows. I might have been there.

So the thing is I really can't say I have many or any regrets. I think that I just don't have any. Particularly sitting in a context with you talking like this, I feel badly about the fact that it's so hard for me to survive economically at this late date. And I will say for the record my financial situation is worse now than it has ever been at any time in my life. I have worried about money every day of my adult life. I have never NOT had to worry about money. I keep hearing people talk about on television, Well, we really have to be concerned about those families. It's different when you're a single person. But they use the figure fifty thousand, you know, those families are making fifty thousand or less. And I say, whoa, I'd love to make fifty thousand. Oh, that would be nice, you know. [laughs]

I guess if I regret anything I regret that it's so hard to survive materially when one stands on principle and works with and for humanity. I say about that time when I'm no longer here in physical form, what I would love to have written somewhere, whether on a tombstone or wherever, I would like my tombstone or the last words said about me to be something like, Barbara was a person who fought for and loved humanity. And you notice I said humanity—not lesbians,

not women, not feminists, not black people, not people of color, not radicals—but humanity, because that really is what motivates me.

I really feel that if you can just sit down, or get to, or get next to, or find out enough information about, all the many different kinds of people who inhabit this rather miraculous planet—I feel that if we could just get to that, we would soon find that we have something in common. And I found that out recently working in the Stand For Peace Anti-Racism Committee, because perhaps as I've mentioned we've done a lot of work with members of the Muslim, Arab American, Central Asian, South Asian and Middle Eastern communities in Albany. And that's new for me. There's nothing like going to a mosque, as I did just about four weeks ago, sitting with the sisters, you know, and I said, whoa, I didn't come here to say hi, I'm Barbara Smith, I'm a [laughs] lesbian. But there were people there who knew I was. And yet, you know, I was welcomed to be there. I was really comfortable. I had a really nice time.

ROSS: Do you think five minutes that we have left on this tape is enough to talk about the conservatism of the LGBT community?

1:01:05

SMITH: Probably, yeah. After the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, the gay and lesbian rights movement in this country blew up, as the younger people say, in a way that was unprecedented in human history, I believe. There were homophile movements in Europe in the 19th Century in Germany. And there was certainly a homophile movement in this country. By homophile I mean gatherings of people trying to get together to get the yoke of oppression off of people who express their sexuality in non-conventional, that is non-heterosexual, ways. But they were more about the old civil rights strategy of wanting to get rights to fit in, as opposed to saying, Hey we don't need anything you have, we just want you to leave us alone, you know, and have access to the basics that everyone deserves. So fitting in was more the homophile model, although people would say that's a simplistic way of talking about it.

And then there was the gay liberation struggle, which was down with the anti-Vietnam War movement, which was down with the Black Panthers. The gay liberation movement began with such radical vision because many of the people involved...

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

ROSS: So do you find a political or intellectual home in the LGBT movement?

00:20

SMITH: Well, it has changed a lot since the early days of the movement. And as I was beginning to explain, the first major split in the movement was between those who wanted to develop a multi-issue lesbian and gay, progressive, not to say radical, politics and those who thought that it was important and critical to develop an agenda and an analysis of issues that had heretofore never even been looked at as legitimate issues, to have only a focus on so-called gay rights. So that was the first split. It was going to be a multi-issue movement in solidarity with people who were trying to end the war in Vietnam and who were being supportive to the Black Panthers and who were concerned about police brutality and the assassinations of Black Panther leaders and all the things that were going on then, or was it going to be a movement that only looked at the issue of sexuality oppression based upon one's non-heterosexual sexuality.

Now as I was saying, it wasn't as simple as all the radicals and progressives went over to the side of multi-issue politics and all the moderates and conservatives went over to the side of single-issue politics. It wasn't quite that simple. One reason is that the historical period affected what indeed was radical in the sense that it was, without a doubt, absolutely radical to focus on gay issues when those things had never been addressed in a public way and in a political way in the society up to that point. So there were people who were bona fide leftists who chose the single issue, we're-about-gay-rights-and-not-anything-else-at-this-time route. And then there were other people who chose the multi-issue route. So that was an early split.

And it has played out to the point where we are now where we have an extremely conservative power structure and the LGBT community, epitomized by the Human Rights Campaign, the Log Cabin Republicans, and I think there's some other groups that I don't even know the names of, because they crop up, there's another conservative group that I heard about.

I have ceased to pay any attention whatsoever to the LGBT movement. I read no LGBT periodicals. I don't go to websites. I got a mailing about *In The Life*, which is a wonderful PBS magazine show that's been on for a number of years. I've been on the show on more than one occasion. Love the people who work on the show. But when I got this piece of mail just before I came over here to Northampton, I said, *In The Life*: when was the last time I watched that? [laughs] And I was tickling myself. I said, well this perfectly epitomizes that question I wanted to make sure that we discuss, about why I feel so disaffected. The fact that I'm looking at this envelope and saying, oh my goodness, it's May and I haven't watched a single a single episode of *In The*

Life—it comes on about once a month—since probably two years ago. I am very disaffected.

Now, there was a catalyzing incident that really got me to this place. And that was a year 2000 Millennium March on Washington for gay rights. It was called by the Human Rights Campaign and a woman named Robin Tyler, who actually had a quite notorious reputation in the women's movement as being racist and I think able-ist. I heard that there were problems around how she dealt with women with disabilities at one of those Yosemite music festivals back in the day. So racism and ablism and all kinds of things are associated with her. But the way I hear the story is that she felt like she wasn't getting quite enough attention at a certain period. It was in the late 1990s. And she was at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force annual conference, which is called Creating Change. And I must admit that the way I see NGLTF at this point—I used to have a lot of friends who were very active in NGLT—they found it very hard to keep committed people of color there. And it's a very different organization now I think than it was, say, in the 1980s and early 90s.

But anyway, Robin Tyler was at this NGLTF convention, or conference, and she suggested that we needed to have another national march on Washington. I participated in every single lesbian and gay rights march on Washington except for the Millennium March. And there were three of them prior. There was a 1979 march. There was a 1987 march, where I spoke to upwards of half a million or seven hundred fifty thousand people, a great honor, and then there was the 1993 march, when the movement was already turning to the right, because the major issue for that 1993 march was gays and the military. It's like, whoa, you know. [laughs] It was so crazy. What has happened to my movement? I wrote an article actually around that time called "Where's the Revolution?" about these very issues. It appeared originally in *The Nation* magazine and it's also included in *The Truth That Never Hurts*.

But in any event, Robin did not get a positive response while she was at the NGLTF convention or conference, so then she thought, well, what's the most affluent, well-heeled other lesbian-gay organizations. So she immediately, of course, came up with the answer: the Human Rights Campaign. She also was friends with Troy Perry from the MCC [Metropolitan Community Churches], which is a gay denomination. So that was basically, as we understand it, who was in the room the day that they decided to call for a national march on Washington, which was a complete top-down approach.

A group of us, we call ourselves Lesbians and Gays on the Left, you know, because there are a few of us, a handful of us. And there's an organization in Chicago called Queers to the Left. So, you know, it's not that there are none of us who have this sexuality who also have the radical inclusive politics. But we're definitely in a minority. So some of

us, including again, Leslie Cagan, my old partner in crime, [laughs] we got together and they were having conference calls. And I heard about the conference calls and I said, I would really like to be a part of this. Marla Erlien, who's somebody I met in the women's movement in the 1970s, was also on those calls. And I was invited to be included in the conference calls.

So we did a lot of organizing to try to, number one, get them to at least ask the grass roots—the people who had to make the march happen—if they wanted one. Their idea of doing that was to do on-line polling. But we formed something called the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process. And we went to meetings uninvited at the Washington Hilton. [laughs] We did a lot of different things. [laughs] One of the buttons that I brought to the Sophia Smith Collection yesterday that tickled me as I packed it, it had the universal NO sign, which, as you know, has a red slash through it. So the button says “Hell no, we won't go.” And then the slash is through the initials MMOW, which stands for Millennium March on Washington. So that was one of our buttons, you know, that we made. I mean, we gave them a lot of trouble. They could not stand us.

And one of the things that was so ironic about that conflict is that we were such serious movement activists with such long activist histories in the LGBT movement that we knew a lot of the people in the room and they knew us. So it was really about a political divide. It wasn't about like, these are Johnny-come-latelys or Jane-come-latelys who have no commitment to these politics and who are not serious about getting rights for LGBT people. They couldn't say that because it was one of the strangest things I ever experienced, to be in the lobby or outside the conference room at the Hilton. As my dear friend Ron Simmons said, Oh, you know, it's the big Hilton, the one where they tried to kill Reagan. That was the way he made the distinction between that Hilton and the other Hiltons. So we were at the big Hilton. And we were waiting to go into the meeting. And it was like, Oh hi, So-and-so. Hi, So-and-so. They were the executive directors of national organizations. They were invited to be at the meeting. And we basically invited ourselves.

They got wind of this. They called us party crashers. I said, oh that's great. I've never crashed a party. But we tried to reason with them, and talk to them. And that didn't really work out, but we continued to organize. And we organized that—I guess that initial meeting was in 1998 because, of course, the march was planned for 2000 so it was in advance of it.

We really had a lot of impact, I think, on how people began to dialogue and understand where we were historically and politically at that time as a movement. There were questions that were being raised and dialogues that were happening that people said, We haven't had these kinds of serious discussions for however many years. We used the

next National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Conference to dialogue about it. But, eventually, you know, the march did happen and I watched it on C-SPAN.

ROSS: OK.

SMITH: And at that point [laughs]— Mandy Carter was on the Ad Hoc Committee for the Open Process. One of the things that we she came up with was this idea, and I actually ended up being the person who shipped these items to Elizabeth Birch, who's the director of the Human Rights Campaign. She had gotten an award from the Human Rights Campaign. I'd gotten one from the Boston New England Region because one year at their annual fund raising gala, which was like seven hundred fifty white men in ties and tails and me. [laughs] That was one of the strangest things I've ever witnessed, or been a part of, in my life. There were literally seven hundred fifty white men in formal dress and maybe like five people of color and a few women. It was really very odd. But be that as it may, they chose to honor writers that year. And I was honored. So I had a pewter plate from the Human Rights Campaign. Mandy had gotten an award. And this wonderful person from Florida, what is her name? [Nadine Smith] She had gotten an award, too. And she was active also in the committee.

ROSS: Do you know the kind of work she did?

SMITH: She did a lot of political organizing in the state of Florida for lesbian and gay rights. A black woman.

ROSS: Brenda Joyner?

SMITH: No. The thing is, all three of us decided that we were going to send our awards back. It was Mandy's idea. She said, you know, We should take those damn awards and send them back to the Human Rights Campaign. Well, we were all together. We had a forum at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Conference, in '98, which was before the conference but it wasn't sponsored by the conference. It was like a huge national town meeting that we actually had at that Andy Warhol Museum because one of our members, Bill Dobbs—who I got to be friends with, I'd never known him before—he had a contact there. So there we are in the auditorium of the Warhol Museum. And we actually had brought our awards to that national town meeting about this impending disastrous Millennium March. And we held up the plates, you know, and we showed them to people and we said we were going to turn them in. Well, as it happened, I ended up taking Mandy's back, the person's whose name I'm not recalling, she did not have hers with her. But I ended up taking Mandy's back with me to the hotel room because

the actual conference hadn't started and it never got back to Mandy. So I ended up taking it home with me.

There was an occasion some months later when Mandy was in New York City and was planning to go to a discussion, another one of these open town hall meetings about the Millennium March, which was causing so much controversy, where Elizabeth was indeed going to speak. And I asked Mandy, don't you think it would be a good idea to give these to her? So I actually ended up shipping the awards [laughs] to her. I'm sure Elizabeth really appreciated that. But in any event, I can be humorous about this misguided direction.

One of the things that the Human Rights Campaign did during this period—now listen to this. Barry Goldwater died. And we know who he is. He's the person who voted, among other things, against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, notoriously. He died. He had a gay grandson and he was fairly decent to this young man. And so when he died the Human Rights Campaign puts out a press release, which I got via e-mail, saying how much they mourned the death of Barry Goldwater because of the fact that he really supported gay rights. And I was like, you say what?! I mean [laughs], it's just, you got to be kidding, you know! Barry Goldwater? [laughs] But see, all you had to do was be down with white gay rights, you know. So that happened.

A few weeks later James Byrd is dragged to death in Jasper, Texas. And I said, you know what? They can mourn the death of Barry Goldwater, [but] they don't have a damn word to say about this man, this black man being lynched. Now ain't that nothin'.

A few months later, it was probably one of those off-year elections, Senator [Alfonse] D'Amato, the notorious and not lamented late senator of New York State, he was running against [Charles] Schumer, and looking, of course, for endorsements. The Human Rights Campaign endorses D'Amato based upon...

ROSS: Over Chuck Schumer?!

ROSS: Hello, yes! It happened! It happened! They endorsed D'Amato [laughs] over Schumer for just those self-serving, pork-barrel politics. Every time you looked around there was something more simple-ass happening. [laughs] What else can I say? Every time you looked around there was something more ridiculous and ludicrous happening.

And after we did our organizing around the Millennium March—as I said, I watched it on C-SPAN, and the way they dealt with the issues of inclusion, as backward white people often do, is that they had gospel choirs, you know [laughs]—that route, you know. Let's have some diversity. We'll get a gospel choir! So there's a gospel choir, you know, out at the Human Rights Campaign. It was ridiculous. But I really haven't had very much to do in an organizing way with the LGBT movement since that time.

ROSS: Well, I'd like to spend the last few minutes we have of the interview talking about your writing.

17:27

SMITH: Well, why don't we do that.

ROSS: I won't let you get away with not answering the question about poetry and fiction. So tell me about Barbara Smith the writer. What's going on with you and writing?

SMITH: Well, the thing is, all I ever wanted to do was to be a writer. I didn't know how to go about doing that. Because, again, being a publisher and being a political activist, there are no guidebooks to speak of. Certainly, there weren't any back in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when it first entered my mind that maybe I could be that. And I just dreamed about it. I worked on the junior high school newspaper. Really, the center of my high-school social life outside of classes was the newspaper, working on *The John Adams Journal*, which was a nationally award-winning newspaper. We were perfectly serious. And our advisor, who was a woman and journalism teacher, she probably would have been a professional journalist had she not been born at a time when the only kind of beat a woman could get was the society pages. So she was a really wonderful teacher. And we were very serious. So I just loved that.

I discovered James Baldwin through my wonderful Aunt LaRue. She would bring books home from the library. Langston Hughes had gone to the same high school, Central High School, that my aunt graduated from a few years later. So he was like a real person to us, you know. We had Karamu House, which is the oldest black repertory theater in the country. We just had this rich cultural life going on and we had the books. And she'd bring home Baldwin and Langston Hughes and my great aunt was reciting Paul Lawrence Dunbar poems and, you know, it was just like that.

But when I read *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, that was the first time I thought, wow, maybe I could really do this because it was a story about a child with whom I had more than a little in common. Because I never had read a book like that before. I was reading all these teenage and pre-teenage romances, and I was reading my books for school, you know, *A Tale of Two Cities*, [laughs] all of that kind of stuff that you had to read in those days. And then all of a sudden, like a comet, you know, landing right in my lap, was this book about somebody like me. And he wanted to be a writer, too. Of course, it is a very autobiographical novel. So his quest to nonconform from his family, to do something different, that was in it, too. And that was the day, I said, whoa, OK.

So I go to Mount Holyoke with this deep hope but a vague one of being a writer. And I was so interested in writing my sophomore year

there I took an extra two-credit course. The basic load was sixteen, so I took eighteen credits. And three of those courses were writing courses [laughs], expository writing, short story, and description. Description was the two-credit course.

And the short-story course experience was extremely devastating for me because I always had done so well with writing. I'd never written short stories, but the thing is that English was my subject, you know, and what I loved the most from childhood. And so get into the short-story class—and it's taught by a person who's still known to be one of the leading literary lights in this country, Mark Strand, who was a poet, I see his poems in the *New Yorker* on a regular basis [laughs] and every time I see them I just cringe, because I think about how horribly I felt with him as my teacher. Now he was quite young, of course, in those days, but definitely a rising star. He was a visiting professor to teach these writing courses. And I just felt so embarrassed, I got a C in the course, I believe. And that was the point at which I said, OK, well I guess I can't be that. I was absolutely discouraged.

This of course is in the context of being at this virtually all-white, ruling-class, elite school on scholarship. So, it wasn't just if I had been in a more loving and nurturing environment, who knows what an adult might have said to me, Oh please, Barbara, you know. That was just one course. I didn't have anybody like that. I was basically trying to make it through Mount Holyoke on my own with the support of my few black sisters. So I basically gave up on being a creative writer at that time.

I went to graduate school immediately after college with the goal of teaching African American literature. Because I thought, well, if I can't write it at least I will be able to teach it.

The women's movement saved my life in many ways. Because it was really through getting involved in the women's movement that I found my voice again as a writer. I thought the kind of writing that I would do for most of my life would be just for academic, you know, publications. And with the flowering of feminist journals and presses and periodicals—all the things that make it possible for a person to find a place for their writing—I think blossomed, too. Those were the years of "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" and *Conditions V* and all those publications.

But the fiction and the poetry, I think every young feminist wrote poetry. [laughs] And fiction was always what I wanted to write the most. And if you ask about regrets, I guess if I have one regret it's that I never became a fiction writer. But I think I was probably my own worst enemy in some ways around that, too. I was fundamentally insecure after that experience in that short-story class way back in my sophomore year. In the early 1980s, I actually took writing workshops, fiction-writing workshops. I took one in Boston. I took one in New York City. I hadn't quite given up. And then in the 1980s I actually started writing some short stories. I had a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful teacher in

New York City, a wonderful Puerto Rican novelist whose books have often been marketed to young adults, Nicholasa Mohr. And I had read and taught her work. And I read that she was doing a writing workshop. I submitted my work. I got picked to be in it. We both lived in Brooklyn and she used to give me a ride back to Brooklyn after the class was over. And of course it was, you know, getting later into the evening then. And once when we were talking, we got to be friends, she said, Barbara, she said, I don't think you really have any idea of how good you are. And I was just like, this is what I should be talking about with my nonexistent shrink [laughs], you know.

But as I said, I think I stood in the way of my own writing. I have fundamental insecurity about my ability to write in other forms besides what I have chosen to write in. I think my feeling has always been, if you can't excel at it, just don't do it. I have friends, many friends, who have gone back to school to get a master's in fine art, MFAs, who are already published writers. And I've watched my friends do that. I was on a different path with *Kitchen Table*, wasn't really that interested in going back to school. But I feel, as I said, if there's any regret—I said I didn't have any—it would be that I didn't have the courage, the guts and the self-confidence to pursue other kinds of writing. But where there's life there's hope.

I sometimes think about people who didn't write certain things until they were in their sixties or in their seventies because in truth, often writers' best work are in the later years of their lives. Because that's when you're pulling it all together. And you actually have a clue as to what it is you're doing here and what it all means. [laughs]

I subscribe to the *New Yorker*. That's really my favorite magazine, not *TV Guide*, because of the writing. And they have so much good nonfiction in the *New Yorker*. I know it's not the *New Yorker* of the 1950s and the golden age of whatever. But it's still a literary magazine with really, really good and interesting nonfiction writing. That's what I read the *New Yorker* for, because that's what I'm trying to write, nonfiction writing, hopefully interesting. I almost never read the short stories, and I don't really read much of the poetry, either. The reason is that I'm not that interested in those people and the kind of characters that show up in their stories. Now when they do a special issue, like of young writers and half of them are people of color, like Sherman Alexie, and some of the people I just really think are wonderful, younger writers, different people of color. They did an issue, a fiction issue, that was nothing but Indian writers or South Asian writers. I read every single page of that issue because I identify, you know, even though that's not my nationality.

But the thing is, I don't know, what can I say. I feel good about the work I've done. I feel anxious about the work I still have to do. And I have hopes for the future of continuing to contribute as a writer in that

way. Talking to you about it makes me feel happy about writing, as opposed to sick to my stomach. [laughs]

ROSS: Well, you're such a great writer. And one would never know about these insecurities.

28:15

SMITH: I know, see.

ROSS: Because they don't come out on the page.

SMITH: But see, maybe this is a tape that's going to be [laughs] successful, although I don't really care if people know about this. But I feel so comfortable speaking to you. The thing is that people need to know that it's not as easy as it looks on the page and it's not as easy as—I mean, clearly I have insecurities about my writing. But maybe that's a good thing, because if I didn't I wouldn't be trying to do better, you know. Is that perfect timing?

ROSS: It's perfect timing. Is there anything else you'd like us to say on our last five minutes worth of tape? Did we miss anything?

SMITH: Well, this is a really strange note to end upon. [interruption] But in any event, I talked about how hard it was to be at Mount Holyoke during those years of '65 to '67 and then '68 to '69. And I wanted to say what I got out of that experience, how I feel about the school now and how I survived it. And the way I survived is the links with the other black women students.

The number of black students at Mount Holyoke doubled from my first year to the second. So suddenly we had twice as many. And we had some incredible activists in this incoming first-year class. And I really was so excited to meet them and got to be great friends, I hope, with them. And we created what became the Afro-American Society at Mount Holyoke, which is now I think the Society for Pan African Unity. I probably have the name wrong because they've changed it. But I'm also happy to say that the center that we wanted, the Afro-American center that we wanted, and I'm saying Afro American because that was the term we used in those days, is now the Betty Shabazz Center, and it was named that many years before her tragic death. So the sisters at Holyoke, you know, we got our house and they named it the Betty Shabazz Center. So I was in that generation of students that established an Afro American Society at Mount Holyoke my sophomore year.

All also during my sophomore year with another friend—that friend I mentioned, Marie Therese Oliver, who became the second black woman judge in the state of Massachusetts, her nickname was Terry—Terry and I conceived of doing a series of seminars on black history, voluntary extracurricular seminars, because there was no black studies.

None. The only way you could study black people was to take sociology courses and hear about how ignorant, how criminal and how sick we were. So that was where black people were in the curriculum. And we did our seminars.

One of the professors we invited was Stanley Elkins from Smith, who had written a book considered to be THE book of the time on slavery. He was one of our guest speakers. We conducted some of them ourselves. We took a completely chronological approach. And I think we had six different seminars.

And that was supported and sponsored by the Fellowship of Faith at Mount Holyoke, despite the fact that I had been a questioner and an atheist then for most of my life. At that point I was questioning my religious upbringing. I really found such great support from the assistant dean of the college chapel, throughout all of my college years. I had some wonderful professors at Mount Holyoke. There were the racist idiots, you know, idiots. There were also the people who were so willing to give someone a chance if they were doing the work that they were supposed to be doing and doing it very well. One of the comments I used to get on my papers in the early days at Mount Holyoke, and even when I went to graduate school, was, "remarkably well written," "amazingly well [laughs] done." And when I look at those papers and saw that it was a trend, you know, I say, yeah, amazingly well written for you. Since the stereotype is that, you know, we can't really deal with the language, the King's English and all that stuff. But I loved our English courses. I did well in them except for that C in short story. I think I got a C in expository writing because we could choose our topics and I was always choosing political topics.

But in any event, going to the New School was a great break. I got a lot of academic confidence from going to the New School. And then returning. And then senior year I tore up. I tore up, you know. I got my A pluses. I will never forget there was a junior who lived in my dormitory. We were in the same American Literature class. And one of my favorite professors was the teacher who I'm still in contact with. And she went to pick up my paper. I think it was on some Faulkner novel. And the grade was on the front of it. And it was an A plus. And she looked at me like, You? She couldn't even deal with it [laughs]. I said OK, fine, whatever.

I designed an interdepartmental major in sociology and English. I basically did my own thing. And I got out of there. And then in the 1980s, the college started giving me awards right and left. And also my last teaching position was at Mount Holyoke in '88. So they really got on my good side. I had put the bad parts in the past although still mindful of them. And I'm here today saying I'm a proud Mount Holyoke alumna and I'm here at Smith College.

ROSS: Alright. Well, on behalf, unofficially at least, the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith, I really have been privileged to spend these last two days with you.

SMITH: I am so happy that it was you and me. And I love you, too.

ROSS: As I've said, I've admired you from afar. One of the things that I'm terribly afraid of is that I have many heroes who develop clay feet once I get to know them much better. But there's that rare breed, which includes you, and it only gets better the better the more you know them.

SMITH: That is such a nice thing to say. What a wonderful thing to say.

ROSS: It's absolutely true. I've been in this movement a long time. And I've met a lot of icons, and most of them don't bear up to close inspection.

SMITH: And that's really a shame, isn't it?

ROSS: Yes.

SMITH: That's what I say when I look in the mirror, you know. Even if I don't have the material things, the security and what have you, I can look in the mirror, face on, and not turn away because I know that I'm not doing the right thing. I can look in the mirror. So that's OK with me.

ROSS: Aren't we lucky? We're here at Smith College. The Sophia Smith Collection.

SMITH: Indeed.

ROSS: Two black women that are getting a chance.

SMITH: Whoever thought it would come to this?

ROSS: Really.

SMITH: Really.

ROSS: I'm still stunned. I hope I don't wake up from this dream. And so, again, thank you.

SMITH: Well thank you, Loretta Ross, who is an interviewer and human being extraordinaire.

ROSS: Thank you. Now we can end the love fest.

SMITH: Well it's a good way to end.

36:36

END TAPE 6

END OF INTERVIEW

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