

*Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles:
A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago*

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #4

DEVENDORF, ROBERT (1963-) AB 1985 AM 2004

At U of C: 1982-1984, 2000-present

Interviewed: October 25, 2012

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Interview October 25th, 2012 with Robert Devendorf at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality.

[00:00:00]

KG: Feel free to begin whenever you'd like to.

RD: OK. So you want me to start with how I came here?

KG: Yeah.

RD: Alright. I came here in 1981 for college. I grew up in suburban Buffalo, New York. I was considered very bright and went to a suburban school where I was second in my class and it was expected that we would go to the best schools. I applied here and Columbia. I wanted to go... I didn't really want to go to the Ivies because we didn't really have money. And I didn't, I knew that I didn't have the self-assurance to deal with that – with a crowd of people who came from money and came from culture. So I came here because I knew at least I could be smart. So it was here or Columbia. I wanted to go to Columbia to be in New York but my mother said, "No, I won't pay for that." So I came here instead and found myself kind of over my head.

I had been sent to private school first through third grade because my parents came into some money and because the public schools in Kenmore, New York, which is where I first lived, were crappy. I was already a year ahead of reading and they had no ability to, to attend to that or to accommodate that. So I went to, what's called the Park School of Buffalo, which pissed my mother off because it was way too liberal. She wanted me to go to Catholic school and couldn't get me in. And I was so super happy. It was all... You know, 1969, and it was all kind of "free to be you and me," you know each lower grade had its own bungalow; the campus was on an old farm. I had a private reading tutor. I wanted to learn how to knit; my mother said, "Hell, no." The head of the lower school taught me how to knit; it made my mother crazy. You know we had, there were Bach

concerts at Christmas and I learned French and we had ceramics – I was so happy. And I had a lot of friends that came from well-to-do families, so you know, you go visit them. But they were houses with art, and books, and libraries and you know, people think, they kind of inhabited these extensive worlds and I was really amazed and delighted and then I would go home and say, “Why don’t we do this? Why don’t we have a rose garden? Why don’t we go to Austria?” Which pissed my parents off because, you know, the best we could do is go to Grandma’s house for vacations.

KG: Yeah.

[00:02:49]

RD: So they pulled me out, partly to save themselves the stress of having this dissatisfied child. But I think that that set a tone, and I was just miserable after that. I mean I thought all the other kids were stupid and boring and that didn’t make me very popular. And I was a little gay thing; I figured that out when I was 14, so it was a question of just biding my time and getting out. So this was my way out.

KG: To come to Chicago?

RD: To come here.

KG: To a larger city?

RD: Yeah. I wanted a big city where I knew there’d be some gays.

KG: So I take it from that you weren’t ever out at home?

RD: Not then. Not, uh, I met people here that came out to their parents and who immediately had all their funding pulled and I thought, “I’m just going to wait until college is paid for and then I’ll, you know, make my statement to them.”

KG: So how, I guess, was the coming-out process here for you and for people that you knew?

RD: It kind of sucked. I had one friend who had come from Boston and who had been involved in a gay group for teenagers from the time he was sixteen so he was great, he was very confident and easy-going. There were other people he met here, who were sort of happily openly gay. So it was a period when people were starting to do that. There was a, Brent House was a place on campus where they were very friendly to gays, they had gay groups meet there, so that was happening. At the time there were two professors, Roger Weiss and Howard Brown. Howard was the chair of the music department; Roger was an economist. And they were like the gay godfathers of the campus. They lived up on 54th Place and would have these parties.

KG: So they lived together?

RD: Yeah.

KG: OK.

RD: They'd been a couple for years and years and years and oh my God - those parties. So that made it ok. But that was sort of, it had nothing to do with actually being here. It was what gay people did to survive here. I came out to my friends in my sophomore year. My roommates, when I told them, were awful about it. They already, they already didn't know what to do with me but they would try to break my things.

KG: Wow.

RD: They would trash the house. They made it very uncomfortable to live there.

KG: Was this in the dorms or in an –

RD: Yeah this was in the Shoreland. So I was having adjustment issues. I mean I was doing things like sleeping – the way the lounges were there, the lounges were old apartments that they'd just broken out some of the walls and so they all had full bathrooms and queen bathtubs and I would go sleep in the bathtubs in the lounge so I wouldn't have to be in the room.

KG: Did you have like a resident head or anything that would...

RD: I didn't want to say anything. I just didn't feel like I could.

KG: Yeah.

[00:5:45]

RD: You know, I tried dating people outside of the schools and I was just, I was like two people. I was like this person who would go – used to sneak into the bars. Because the drinking age was 18 in upstate New York, in New York state at the time, and I'd been going drinking since I was 17. I'd been going to gay bars since then. Maybe 16 even, I don't even remember. So here I just went out. And then if you were cute and flirtatious you could get in. So I had the sort of life of going out to gay bars and having sex and that was exciting but it had nothing to do with being here. And then I'd come back here and be this kind of scholarly, cultured thing and they just didn't integrate and it was really kind of horrible. So I couldn't really be either because I, my libido was surging and I was having trouble focusing, you know, Plato.

KG: Yeah. A common problem at U of C.

RD: Yeah, but you know there was no way to do anything but do that.

KG: Did you have a social group that you could go out with that was also here or was, were your social spheres completely different as well?

RD: There was this one friend named John. He and a bunch of guys that were a year or two older than us all moved to an apartment in Boystown, which was then called North Town, I think. So they were near, near Wrigley Field. It was still really sketchy up there back then. Like, they just, one whole development they gutted all the buildings. There were these weird, vacant areas. It was dodgy. But they went up there. He actually never graduated because he was too busy having fun but I would go up there and see them to get out. I think they did that in my third year.

KG: But you stayed in the dorms?

RD: Third year I moved out of the dorms. I think because of the adjustment issues and my, and the friends that I had were kind of assholes too. I admired them and I was sort of like some stupid dog who just worshipped them and they treated me kind of badly. So, when they had, when I wanted to live with them, they're like, "Why would we live with you?"

KG: Oh my.

RD: Right. So I ended up living with these other sort of outcast types, who no one... They were kind enough to take me in. And they knew I was gay and it wasn't an issue.

KG: Oh OK.

RD: But it was, it was kind of like being in the gutter around the margins. And it was hard.

[00:08:18]

KG: OK. So these groups that you mentioned at Brent House, could you talk a little bit more about those?

RD: I didn't really participate in them because I wasn't all that political. There were a number of people I knew who did. And I believe they were open to straight people too because I seem to remember at least one woman who was straight who also got herself involved. I can't remember who the priest was, who was in charge of it, but he was very active. And I mean they would bring speakers in, Quentin Crisp came and talked one time. They were good about hooking up with other forces outside of the University to get, to sort of like build community across the city with the groups who were here. I think that they were involved in the early AIDS work, advocacy for people with AIDS and also getting condoms out and getting information out. So they were, that was really sort of an important place where that happened.

KG: But it had sort of a political bent that you weren't interested in?

RD: I was, I was so lost and so confused about what I wanted to say about who I was. I didn't really know how to answer that question. You know, I have a hard time remembering what I did. I think what I did was I inhabited a fantasy world that seemed to be made up of Virginia Woolf and Henry James and some sort of weird Edwardian something or other. I graduated in three years; I actually graduated in '84 but I was class of '85. I took a job at the Chicago International Film Festival, where my friend John worked. It was a crap job. Just... I think, what was I doing, data entry or something. It was hideous. And I finished my bachelor's paper and I ended up working as a waiter in Hyde Park. So I was still living down here. I made some money and then that October '85 I got on a plane and went to Europe and didn't come back for three months. I just went to see what I could see. So that's what I did.

KG: Did that, like, help you process your time at UChicago or...?

RD: A little. What happened was, I got here and I suddenly discovered art and literature and philosophy and thinking and sort of deep thinking about, you know, mind and soul and spirit and what matters. And that's what I wanted. I wanted a life that was comprised of those modes of being. And you just don't get that in this country. You know, so when it came time to get a job I'm like, "Well what about my soul?" And they're like, "Well who cares?" And I thought, "Well, I care." So I don't think I ever really properly had, I'm almost 50 now, I've had very few jobs that people would call "proper." I just sort of banged around pursuing this other thing, this other mode of being. You know, and for the sake of keeping that going.

KG: Is that what led you back here for grad school?

RD: Mmhmm. Yeah. I had done teaching in different venues, and I really enjoyed it, and I thought, "Oh well if I get a Ph.D. I can enter the teaching market at a university. Well, particularly since 2000, that completely tanked, right? And funding is cut, and so there's this been this hideous disillusion that's come in the last bunch of years. So I don't know what I'm going to do now. I mean I'm sort of trying to piece a life together but I don't have any faith, I couldn't muster the faith that finishing the Ph.D. would get me anywhere. And also I came in under a very different funding regime than they have now, so I had, I don't remember the name of the scholarship. It was the good one. Whatever the big one was: \$14,000 a year, no insurance, no summer funding. How the hell do you live?

KG: Yeah.

RD: You know, so since I got here I've just been working working working. I'd go away in my summers and teach, I worked for Center for Talented Youth and I'd go, I ran a site for two years out there, I went back to my old job one year, doing database work believe it or not. And it just, all I've done is work. And I never got a writing year – that screwed up my language stuff. All the working in the summers. Then I ended up working for the Master's program for MAPH; I was a preceptor for four years, which I loved and I learned a ton from it. But that kept me from writing also. I could maybe crack out a

proposal a year or a chapter a year but I wasn't able to – and I also needed more money. I spent, well I did spend three years as a doorman at a gay bar, Big Chicks, on Friday nights but that screwed up my schedule.

KG: Yeah.

RD: You know so that would shoot the weekend down and then I'd start to get back on a normal schedule and then I'd be out doing that again. So that, that was a problem. So I quit that because it was getting in the way of getting work done and I started tutored through the, well, I would get clients referred to me through the Lab School – I didn't work for the Lab School – and I've been doing that now for nine years? So that's a really wonderful thing that I enjoy. Then doing that and teaching, when do you write? And then in the summers I was just exhausted. I started taking out student loans just to survive the summers. So summer would hit, I live a block from the beach, and I'm like, "I just really want to go to the beach; I'm so tired." So I would get some work done and then it was back to teaching again. And I've been teaching Humanities core now, this is my fourth year. So it's fine, but the first year, the way Humanities core works here, they're like, "Here are the books. Good luck!" The Mahabharata. I don't know anything about the Mahabharata, so I had to teach myself and I think I did a very good job of it but... It's been my experience here of, no money, constant labor, people saying, "God we really wish you'd write." And I'm like "Well, if you funded me I could." And there's better, there's much better funding now but I've never had my insurance covered here. I spent a lot of years putting it on credit card checks. So then I had to work extra in the following years to pay down the credit cards. So it's been like that.

KG: That sounds rough.

RD: Yeah it's been bad.

KG: Can you, is it possible, I guess, to cultivate a gay life and a gay identity with all that work to do?

RD: Well that was the other thing that I had a hard time with, was that I had been out in the world, I live on the North Side, I have friends up there, and I was not able to resolve the two of them. And actually what I ended up doing was giving up a lot of the gay identity in the course of the 12 years I was here. And doing it on purpose. There was some drug abuse that I got caught up in and that was ruinous in its own way. I got out of it kind of just by an act of will. I think it has been very difficult to have both.

I think some of it is generational. The generation I'm in, I don't think, ever really felt that it was integrated in, or was going to be, or should be, maybe? There was never that expectation. So we were kind of exceptional and having fun being that. And I think that that's dying. And maybe it's fine that it's dying. But it, it was hard to chart being here and being that and I tried to be both. And I, I did both it would have been ok. And I think if I had lived down here it would have been fine; I think if I were straight it would have been a hell of a lot easier. So yeah I think that that did actually get in the way. The other

thing was I, and this for straight or gay true, the longer I spent here the more foreign I became to most people. You know what that is right?

KG: Yes.

RD: You know and people just stare at you, say things that come out of your mouth, and you might as well be speaking Urdu. And I increasingly became concerned, and I thought, “Oh, the better I become at this, the lonelier I will be, because what this is actually doing is destroying my capacity to socialize normally. I have a group of friends who’s a little older than me; a couple of them are flight attendants, one’s got his own design firm, another one’s a pediatric nurse, another flight attendant, there’s a physician in the group. But what was, what I found really helpful was these particular guys, they’re very interesting, they’re politically committed, they’re interested in a lot of things, and they really value me. They don’t treat me like I’m foreign; they’re actually really curious about what I offer. Sometimes they don’t understand it, but they made it all fine.

Which is not a feeling I ever really had down here. Down here, the sense that I got of the value of what I would do was purely instrumental. Like, how was this going to help me get a career? Not are these ideas interesting or compelling? Are they politically or personally useful? What difference does beauty make? You know, these sorts of things that have nothing to do with a graduate education. You know, and I watched a lot of people instrumentalize their theses, like, “Oh well I want to work with so-and-so and I know that these are popular trends right now so if I just do this and this and this I’ve got a good chance of getting into the following – “ and I’m like, “What the fuck is that? That’s not thinking.” So I got disillusioned at that level too, because what was interesting was outside of here I could see incredible value for lots of different kinds of people for what I know and can do, in an expensive kind of general, generic social way. Here I saw no value, other than this kind of instrumentalized reproduction of a certain kind of very narrow disciplinarity. And I couldn’t get behind that project either.

KG: Yeah that’s tough. So when, I guess you ended up finding people outside of the school that you can relate to?

RD: Mmhmm.

KG: Has it been, was it, was this like something that you felt as an undergrad and a graduate student, that there’s, that it was hard to form a social group here?

RD: Yeah here, I had never really been able to socialize well here. I’ve made friends here but the problem is you make friends and then they get a job somewhere else or they leave. So no one is around very long. After awhile you just get tired. You know, I’m almost fifty and I’ve made so many groups of friends who are no longer around. And you just stop. You know, you’re like, “Why am I going to invest in this, only to have my heart broken when someone leaves and gets on with a new life?” That’s not a, I can’t live like that. You know, and then there’s this idea that, there’s sort of something, you’re not really committed to the profession because you insist on having things like viable community or

sustained relationships with humans. Somehow you should be, your life should be completely transportable, and it should be fine that you're in Missoula, Montana or New York or, you know, I know a guy who finished U of C, couldn't find work, and was very excited to get a job in Ankara, Turkey. He didn't speak Turkish. I'm like, "You're gonna go, you're gonna go teach Victorian literature to the Turks? A, Do they really care? You know, is it worth it? If you want to be in Turkey, great. If you want to work with these people on whatever projects they have..." But it just seemed like he was like, this was the thing that would let him do what he did somewhere, anywhere. And I just thought, I don't care. It doesn't seem to make a life.

KG: Yeah.

[00:20:49]

RD: Or a gay life. I mean that's the other thing. I've had HIV for five years now and I can't just pack up and go anywhere. You know, I have medical AIDS. I have to be somewhere where the stigma is low and where I can get proper medical care. And that's the other thing with being gay, right? I'm not going to Alabama.

KG: Yeah. Yeah, I was in Russia; it was terrible.

RD: Really?

KG: Yeah.

RD: Yeah things are awful there right now. An acquaintance of mine is a professor at Southern Illinois University. He teaches evolutionary biology. He's openly gay. His partner tried to go down there and live with him; he couldn't find work. The professor comes from a family that owns a vineyard in California so his partner packed up and went to California and works in the family vineyard and is really happy. And this guy is down there in Carbondale, you know teaching evolutionary biology as an openly gay man to a classroom that at any given moment is 50% Fundamentalist Christians. So I'm thinking, "I don't really want to do missionary work." You know, maybe I should feel better about that, but that's kind of what it feels like to me.

KG: Yeah.

RD: It's either missionary work or it's, I feel like it's what they used to do with younger sons of the Empire in Britain. Like, "We don't actually have room for you and we're really glad you got this education at Oxford but we have no use for you so maybe you could go to India? And then we don't have to think about it, because I'm sure you'll be able to do something there whatever it is." That's kind of what it feels like now.

KG: Do you think that other gay academics from here have the same, I don't know, issues that we're talking about with moving?

- RD: I don't know. I mean the ones that I know, or have known, I guess this can happen to straight or gay, but I've seen a lot of their relationships just fail. One guy I know here, I'm pretty sure his relationship died after about two or three years. Someone I know who came to the graduate program with his partner and that lasted maybe two years and then the partner went back to Pennsylvania. I mean I know there are successful gay academics here. I think of Debbie Nelson as kind of, she came, she's got this partner, they've got their big house in Indiana, she's moved her way up into – what's her position now?
- KG: Oh I don't even know. I've just, I've just know the name.
- RD: Yeah I mean she's been sort of moved out of the English department, she's, I think she was chair of Gender Studies for a while and then she moved up into, it'll come to me, I can't think what it was, but she seems to be someone who's actually managed to have substantial gay life, and a partnership, right, and money and responsibilities here that give her great pleasure, many of which have to do with her being an active and out lesbian and being a tribute to the community. It seems like you could do that now, and you can do that here now. For me it's kind of, I don't know how I would do that, but I'm glad to see that some people seem to be able to do it.
- KG: And you think that's a current moment in time sort of thing and not so much in the past?
- RD: No not in the past. I mean I think, I'm very suspicious of identity politics initiatives. You know, they've got that kind of Great White Burden feel to me. But it seems in this particular case, it seems like it might be working, and working well, and it's good to see.
- KG: Yeah how do you see gay life here now after having been here in the '80s?
- RD: I don't see it. I don't live down here. I mean I work and leave. I see, like, I see the occasional baby gays running around. I've been teaching undergraduates for four years and some of them are obviously gay and they seem comfortable and fine. I did, I had a couple of heart to hearts with a couple of gay students who wanted to talk about it who were in difficulties, but the difficulties didn't really have to do, they were personal but weren't about this place. Well no, that's not true. One student I talked to has had real issues here, particularly with athletics. So I've talked to him a bunch of times. But I just, you know, this place feels like White Man Land in both like the heterosexual way and the class way. You know it's heterosexual and with a gift shop for others. So I don't know, I don't know what it would look like differently. I don't know how you would change it, I don't know, I mean maybe it needs to be that thing. And then those of us who are not that thing take what we, you know, the best it can do is make us comfortable while we learn from it, take what we want, and get on with our project.
- KG: Do you find yourself in mentorship roles for students here who are struggling with this sort of White Man's Land, kind of –
- RD: Unofficially, yeah. I mean because, like I said, I've had a couple talk to me and you know, I put them on email. Some gay, some straight. And I feel like that's something that

I can do and like to do. So yeah, I'm happy to do it, and I think it's really important. What I miss, with these parties, with these Roger and Howard parties, everyone went, and the nice thing was they were intergenerational. So it was undergraduates through people who were like in their seventies. Everyone went, everyone drank, everyone mixed. Because Howard was in the early music world, anybody who was in town and was doing music work was at those parties. So like Mary Springfels who used to run the Newberry Consort would come, I got to be friends with her for a while. Drew Minter used to come, like all these big people were always here, and it was just a ball. And you know, I think one of the joys of minority life, at least when it works, is that status that you cut across other lines of status. So you don't worry about, "Oh you're a professor" or "Oh, I'm only such-and-such and age," it's like, "Oh, we're all gay, who cares, what the hell." Which is how they were. So it was wonderful to be a young person in that. It was also nice to be a gay person in that because you got to see all these different models for the ways people had built lives. I actually spent a lot of time at their house because I took up with someone who was in a relationship, he was very close to them, he had to leave his apartment because he was living with his partner and they took him in and he became like the child they never had. So I would go spend time with him at their house. So for a good year I was at their house all the time. Dinner parties, they would give us tickets to the opera, I got to meet their friends, they had a summerhouse out in Michigan and we'd go spend time there. So I got to be part of this sort of, this gay world. I know Jim McDaniel [Interview #23] and Kevin Hockberg have taken over that role. They live in Roger and Howard's old apartment and they bought their old house in Michigan, and they've inherited it.

KG: Wow!

RD: So the exact same thing at a slightly different level with them. And I know they sort of take people in, they do an alumni function every June. But I know that they've got a little, they've collected a group of professors, alum, people who've known them for years, new undergraduates. So they're keeping it going to some extent. It's not quite the same thing. Because that, back in the day, was the only thing. But that's how I met them, too, was through that thing.

[00:28:37]

KG: So they, they were like the main, I guess, mentors of gay students at that time?

RD: As far as I know. That and I can't remember the priest's name at Brent House. He was just, I remember, "Sam" something. [Ed.: Sam Portaro, Interview #65] Uh... It's not there. So those were the two main institutions I think that kind of, that did it. That was a moment, I remember a little later in the 80s, when students were starting to fight for some sort of recognition, that there was a problem that needed to be addressed and it was not taken seriously at all and it wasn't until Howard Brown and some other professors stepped in and said, Bert Cohler was another one, who were like, "OK you have to address this." Then the administration was said, "Well, maybe." But at the level of students, they didn't give a shit. And then the students were angry because they were like,

“Well this is our fight for how we’re going to be treated and as long as we got it they don’t want to hear it, but once the professors have their agenda, now it’s theirs.” So there was a lot of resentment.

KG: Were they organized in a group with a name or?

RD: The students?

KG: Yeah.

RD: GALA.

KG: GALA? Oh OK, so GALA was already in the 80s?

RD: Yeah. GALA was around.

KG: Yeah we have some documents from them in the 90s but we weren’t sure if they were GALA as GALA were in the 80s.

RD: Yeah they were. Gay and Lesbian Aware – Gay and Lesbian Association.

KG: Yeah I think it’s that.

RD: Yeah GALA was around. I mean it was, gay was hip back then.

KG: In the ‘80s?

RD: Yeah. It was new and exciting. Boystown was just coming into being. So there was this sense, like, that you actually, we were something. AIDS made a huge difference; suddenly everyone had to pull together. I was, I think the fact of living in Hyde Park, and the fact of living in Chicago, shielded me from a lot of it. I didn’t really know people who were getting sick or coming down with it, but you know, the people that I know now, their world was decimated. And the people who survived the first onslaught often, there’s a guy named Harold... what’s Harold’s last name? He owned a place called Flashy Trash up on Halsted Street just south of Addison that was this warehouse of like 500,000 items and it was this, it was all retro stuff. But like Julia Roberts would shop there and whenever there was a period movie in town they’d go to him for costumes and he was this big force in the community, but he lost everybody. And then he got really depressed and got caught up in crystal meth. And then he just died – 58. And you know for years you’d just see him stumbling around lost. He lost his business, he lost everything. So I think what happened was for those who survived, that moment in the plague, having lost so many people, you don’t know what to do. You know, I had a partner who, back in the 90s, every single one of his group of friends was dead. He was the only one alive and he had HIV too – I didn’t – but he didn’t know what to do with himself; he’d come home at night and drink a six pack. Because everyone was dead.

KG: I'm so sorry. I don't even have a way to express...

RD: I don't, I don't think about it mostly. The great shock for me recently, a couple years ago when I was still, I reached the phase when suddenly I was like the daddy figure. All the sudden everyone who was like 25 was like, "Oh hi!" I'm like, "Uh... are you lost?" "No, hi!" "Uh, ok." And I have HIV. I'm still not on meds; I don't need them. So my health is fine. Back in the day, when everyone, people were dying, we just expected people had it. It was never a thing. You could make your sort of decisions if you wanted to be with them or not but it was, but you knew what you were getting into, right? The assumption was if you're having sex, you need to be, it's out there, so you need to be aware. What I've found with these young people, everything is fine until I would say something, then they would freak out. Like, just like, [loud gasp], like literally stand against the wall, like I had just turned into a gorgon. And it's hideous. Like people who I had slept with, but not had sex with, but had spent the night would threaten to call the police on me.

KG: Oh my gosh.

RD: And it happened a lot. And I'm like, what the hell is up with this generation? And it seems we're in a situation now where, there's a world of the healthy, who deserve to be healthy, and the world of the unhealthy, who made moral errors, which is typically American, right? So, as I understand it, my generation – we're the bad, old AIDS-y people. We did drugs and we fucked around and we get what we deserve, but the good news is we'll be dead, and we will, and then the playing field will be clear again. It's just a question of waiting for the plague – well now we're the plague, right? We used to get the plague, but now those of us who have HIV, we might as well be the virus. So it's just a question of getting us out of the way because we're the threat. And that's actually the way medicating people with HIV has shifted, I don't know if you know the way the public policy has shifted. What it used to be was, kind of, if it ain't broke don't fix it because the drugs do so many other things to your system, you know, and the way it was for a while was, if you took certain drugs, you were not able to take later developments of drugs because these drugs made it impossible for these drugs to be effective. So the idea was if you stayed off drugs long- you stayed off them until you needed them. Because who knew what new developments there would be and who knew what they were going to do to you? Well that's not true anymore.

KG: Oh yeah, everyone's trying to get a zero load or whatever.

RD: Right. The minute you test positive they're like, "You need to go on meds." Part of that is this idea, the claim that's made is that, "Well, HIV stressed the immune system unnecessarily and if we can get the viral load down to zero, then that's one less stress on your immune system." No one talks about the stress of the drugs on your system, which can be terrible. The real, the other push which I think is the real push is the public health initiative, which is the more people that have a zero viral load, the less infectious they are to the general population. So it's an attempt to turn people with the virus into the least infectious kind of thing possible. Whether they want the drugs or not, whether they can afford the drugs or not, right? It's like, it's not about our health, it's not about what we

want, and it's not about our ability, like what are the drugs going to do to us? It's about 'medicate them and stop them from being a threat.' So there's been this real shift, again in a way that kind of puts us on the outside of the world of virtue. We're not people with a virus now, we are the problem. So that kind of sucks.

[00:36:02]

KG: Yeah. Do you find that stigma within the University?

RD: I don't talk about it. I told my advisors when I found out I was positive because I found out at the beginning of summer. I was on my way to go work on my dissertation and I, I thought I might have caught it in February that year, it was '90... no 2007. Because I got sick in a weird way and all the sudden I had this weird rash, and I'm like, "Whaaat is this?" And I thought, "Oh no, no, no. Please, no." So I went and got an HIV test here I think and I came up negative because I think probably what happened was it hadn't been longer enough after for there to be enough in my system to test positive. But this place had no resources. Like if I had come up positive then, they wouldn't have known what the hell to do. It was bozo circus, it was hell. I would never... I don't know if they've changed it since then but it was a terrible place to get an HIV test.

KG: I've actually had one here.

RD: You did?

KG: Yeah and they would not believe me that I needed it for my passport.

RD: Really?

KG: Yeah it was really weird.

RD: They're... I hate them here for that. So, I ended up getting it at TPAN, Test Positive Awareness Network in Edgewater. It was a 20 minute oral test and they're like, "Oh yeah, you're positive." I'm on my way to lunch. And they're like, talking to you, and wanted to be my friend and everything and I'm like, "I got friends. I'm ok." What was my point in saying that? Anyhow that killed the summer. I just couldn't make myself read Jane Austen.

KG: Yeah. Fair enough.

RD: Fair enough. So I went to my advisers and they're like, "So... you didn't write." And I'm like, "I just found out in June that I'm HIV positive." And they're like, "It's fine, don't worry about it." They were great. They would ask about my health. So on top of working all the time and everything else, then that hit. That took me a while to kind of get used to. And then there was this business of suddenly realizing I was a pariah within the gay community. And then, in the old days you just told people; it was like coming out all over again except now you're coming out to gay people, many of whom did the same thing

straight people used to do, which is “Oh my God, you’re disgusting, get away from me, [loud gasp]!” I’m like, “Really? This is what we do now?” And it is. So that was bad.

KG: Yeah. But you found the individuals that you work with have been, I guess, fair?

RD: Fully, beyond fair. I mean, understanding and supportive. Without being, you know I work with Beth Helsinger and Elaine Hadley and both of them are good, decent women who think a lot about their students’ well-being.

KG: So this is maybe more an institutional problem with the U of C?

RD: You know, they’re not equipped to handle pain and suffering down here. They’re just not. The fact that human beings have to labor, that this takes their energy. I mean this is what the graduate students fight about who want childcare. They don’t really, they’re having a really hard time thinking, “Oh but if you’re a responsible scholar, would you really have had a child?” Right?

KG: Yeah that doesn’t sound wrong to me.

RD: Right? There’s this real bewilderment around these things that people do and the needs that they have. So, you would have some sort of a disease or a disability, I’m sure it’s the same with that, it gets, it makes it harder for you to do this thing, they’re thought is, “Maybe you should do something else. Because, you know, this is what we do here in Healthy White People World is we breathe deeply and you know, eat curry and do our work.” So.

KG: Yeah. Yeah, I’m not going to offer my opinion on this.

RD: You know it’s, it’s the culture of the life of the mind. What’s interesting is that there’s a lot of people who are trying to understand the life of the mind is the life of the body; that’s what I was trying to write about with my dissertation, in some ways. And that seems like one of the great advantages of what gender studies can do, or queer studies. There’s a lot of different – feminism has spent how many years still trying to work on this issue. So there’s a lot of strains in academic thought that really are pushing it and it’s popular enough, but certainly in English? What I found in English that pissed me off was this way in which, you know, I’ve been in the graduate program at the University of Minnesota in the late 80s, started in American Studies and switched to Comp Lit and dropped out because I think I had a nervous breakdown. But that was sort of the glory days of high theory. Minnesota was the epicenter. But those were moments where everyone was reading Derrida, everyone was reading all this stuff, everyone was reading Foucault and the issues were really compelling. Like, what is this relationship between language and bodies and how does ideology work on all of this. And it seems like, in the humanities at least, if that’s true then it’s fashion. Right? “Oh we don’t do that anymore.” Like, gender was last year, this year is whatever it is. There’s always some way in which, it’s not really the ‘thing.’ I’m thinking, what do you mean it’s not the thing? What did like women turn into something else that you don’t have to think about it?

KG: Yeah. I've got, I've had advisors sort of say the same thing to me about queer history. It's like, "Well, that's not going to be popular for very long." And I'm like, "But... there will still be gay people."

RD: Right? Right? It's fashion! I keep thinking, there was a movie about the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi that came out in the early 90s. It was a documentary about him called... I don't remember what. It sort of follows him through a season, a design season. This is what, comparatively, goes on in English. So he decided, "This year's fun fur. We're doing fun fur." "Oh my God, fun –" "How did you –" "That's fantastic!" "I'm seeing purple! It's fur! It's fur! It's fun fur." "Like, how did you come up with this?" He's like, "So. I was at home one night and I couldn't sleep and I turned on the TV and I was watching public television and there was Nanook of the North!" It was a silent film about an Eskimo. And he's like, "I was so fascin—It was fabulous! I was so fascinated! And I'm watching these fur things, these fur costumes and I thought, 'That's it! That's it!' I gotta have fur!" And I'm thinking, "That's how English works." I mean the number of classes I was in where they're like, "So I was thinking, I saw this thing and then I thought about this thing and then I'm like, yeah! This thing!" And I'm like, "Seriously?" And if it's, if it's generated that way and treated like, I mean at least fun fur –

KG: Probably not going to damage anyone.

RD: No. But if it's like, "Hey, you know, I'm thinking like gender? Women? You know, yeah we'll do that for a couple years and once my career's established we'll do something else." So there's a way in which it really throws people under the bus. You know, it seems like it's the liberal problem of using the other, the disadvantaged other, as your moral stepping stone into a politics that claims to be ethical. And then once you made your statement, you move on with your career and those creatures are left to go about their business, their unfashionable business of suffering whatever it is. I don't know. Is that too cynical?

KG: No. No. If I weren't interviewing you I would have a lot more to say about that.

RD: Yeah. Am I off topic about gay?

KG: No.

RD: No.

KG: You're doing a wonderful job.

RD: OK.

KG: Well, so I guess, before you came here did you have any idea that this is how it was going to be like or did you expect your primary school that was so nice?

RD: I really didn't know what to expect. I was too sheltered to understand. And this place was very, very different back then. I mean it was, I think half the students were from Illinois, it was considered a smart school but sort of like, really odd. I mean now I see these students coming in, and now apparently they're marketing the shit out of this place in China. So what I'm seeing is this international, this new kind of international haute bourgeoisie coming to finish their children. Right? So they're coming from South America, they're coming from the Far East, you know, I'm sure they're coming from Africa. So the upper classes are sending – it's a finishing school. I think it's a little unfair but it was really wonky back then and I think because this place is always behind. Even though I was here in the 80s, it was still the 70s. So it still had this kind of radical, dirty, I mean the buildings were all run down, the place was a dump. The people were really, I thought they were just really interesting and quirky. I mean, we were always running around the South Side getting ribs and shit, at like three in the morning at rib shacks on 79th street. And they would just looking at us like, "Lord here come those white children again. Alright, baby, get over here." It was, it wasn't shiny the way it is now. It wasn't, people who knew the U of C knew that you were mentally really sharp, that you had this sort of arsenal of skills and people were quirky and interesting but it didn't, you know people didn't come to go into finance the way they do now. It wasn't the same sort of thing.

So I came, I came and was surprised by this kind of sea of cultures, and you know people who were using culture as a means of living rich lives. And I learned how to do that. I learned how to do it pretty effectively and it actually made all the difference. It did set me apart but I do feel looking back and seeing sort of how I lived, I became the person I wanted to be. But I learned it here. I really, I saw it when I was a kid at that private school and I could see its appeal but I didn't know what to do. But here I kind of learned what to do. I think had I been, I wish I had been better prepared for it. And I wish gay, gay got in the way. You know? I'm guessing it probably gets in the way less now because the ways in which these kinds of things are, call them queer, in and of themselves, are more available to the general consciousness. For me, I'm doing *Portrait of a Lady* now, teaching it, doing a little private class with a kid I tutor and I haven't read that in probably four or five years and I'm shocked at how gay those Jamesian conversations are. It sounds like two fancy queens in a bar. I'm reading this stuff going, "How did I miss this? Why didn't anybody point that out like years later, years ago, why didn't they be like, 'Did you see that? Read that! Think about that!'" And it did, a lot of snaps [Robert snaps].

KG: One of my friends is studying James for her BA so I'll have to ask her.

RD: Oh my God. *Portrait of a Lady*, the first couple chapters are so full of like [mimes something]. Yeah. Um I'm not answering your question but what was it?

[00:48:14]

KG: Oh God, I don't know. I liked where you were going with "gay gets in the way of this."

RD: Yeah OK. I...

KG: Do you think other gay students had the same experience that you did?

RD: I don't know. You know, I really don't know. I know, the gays I knew when I was an undergraduate all fled the neighborhood. Many of them ended up very successful; one ended up, I think, with New York Review books, an editor of something. I think the problem has been, it's more of a general cultural problem and it was a problem of the time. You know it was a moment still back then coming out of feminism, moving into gay rights, where the whole point was to celebrate your free sexual body. Like that's what, that's the best you can get to be this visceral thing, twitching and dancing and fucking and you know.

And AIDS just blew that up in everybody's face. And I look back at it now, and I look at myself as an older person who has a different relationship to sex and I think sex kind of wrecked it. It did a lot of damage. The idea that you had to be, like that was the thing that you should be, that reinforced the kind of stereotyped hierarchies around, you know, body beautiful and people who worked out and there was this, you know, who went to circuit parties and who didn't. This sort of, this gay male as the triumphant alpha male. Which everybody, if you weren't that you didn't really count. That came out of the seventies. It took a beating during the early days of AIDS but then what happened was that people who were on AIDS drugs which often included steroids and growth hormone became these giants. What happened was a lot of people ended up on disability, they didn't have to work, they had nothing to do but go to the gym, and they were on these things that made them huge and they were trying to build their self esteem up so they became these massive things. And there was actually a way in which, I have one friend who still complains about this, who, he's remained HIV negative, he's almost 60 now, but he said yeah he would go to bars in San Francisco and try to go home with people and they're like, "We don't have sex with people who are HIV negative." So it was a stigma to be negative because everyone, the people who were positive were the ones who were sort of triumphant kings of the sexual field. And that did get into my head. So there was this way I felt like I had to somehow find a way to compete so I could be properly male. And it, it had nothing to do with the kind of mental work I've done here and it's sad because I love the work I do here and I wish I'd been able to value it more. Because that's one of the reasons I ended up positive. You know, I got caught up in the drugs, and that's what crystal meth does for people. It makes you suddenly this kind of heroic porn star fucking machine and a lot of the people that I met who were really caught up in it were people like... accountants. You know? A lot of them were just like nice people who weren't alpha studs and who felt like unless they were they had no value. And so this drug gave them the alpha stud value. You do all these things you wouldn't even think of doing other times. And it destroyed them. And it, it derailed me. It didn't quite kill me. But yeah, that sort of thinking, that it's got to be about fucking, got in the way of being about thinking, but thinking not actually accommodating the fact that you had a body. They were both at far extremes, and that totally sucked.

And then with HIV I think what also happened to me, everyone I knew had it, it was really sort of an interesting experience. Everyone had it. I'd go home with people; they all had it. I seemed to be the only one who didn't have it. I got sloppy. This was after I'd given up the drugs. I got tired. Part of it was, every single experience you have, if you're actually trying to be intimate with someone, is, 'Wow! Let's be intimate.' That's your first step, 'Let's be intimate.' And your second thought is, you're supposed to ask, 'Are you going to kill me? Do you have HIV? Are you going to hurt me?' And if they say no, your thought is supposed to be, 'Liar.' So the whole thing is that anyone you're about to be intimate with is probably lethal. How do you live like that? So after years and years and years of everybody being lethal, all the time, I started to trust people and be like, 'Are you lethal?' 'No.' 'Alright.' And then one of those somewhere... It might not have actually been one of those; it might have been someone else too, who we established that he was and I wasn't, and we had a lot to drink and he was at my house and I'm like, "Look I have a rule, if you're, you need condoms, dadadadada," And when I was kind of passed out and asleep he went ahead and fucked me anyhow. And claimed, "Oh, I forgot." So there's a lot of that that goes around too. So in a sense I kind of got it on purpose but not really but part of it too was just exhaustion. You know, after every sexual encounter you're like, "Is it yet? Is it yet? Do I have HIV yet? Do I have HIV yet? Do I have HIV yet?" You're finally like, "Just give me the goddamn virus! Because I cannot live my life always waiting to get it." In some ways it's easier to have it. As awful as that sounds. And my partner has it, and one of the reasons we got together is because we both have it. And it's just easier. I don't have to worry about it. And there's like, for the first time in almost 30 years, it's not a problem.

KG: Yeah there's an amount of freedom in that I suppose.

RD: Yeah, yeah. And you know, for people who are both negative, you know if the one cheats, you might still get it, right?

KG: Yeah.

RD: It's too late for us. We got it. Now what are we going to do? Now we can get on with it. I mean, you know it's kind of shitty. I used to worry about people, you know, what's going to happen when someone gets sick, what happens when you die. The other things is, pushing 50, I'm at the age when it's going to be something.

KG: Yeah. You won't live forever.

RD: No, you know, I, lots of people have seen their parents go down. A friend of mine was just with a friend who died the other day. He had HIV but he had lymphatic cancer and that's what killed him. It spread to his liver and he died from cancer. He was 48. And I'm sure that having HIV didn't help the immune system handle things like cancer but. You know, and I'm part of a generation that's filled with people who are sick and surviving and dying. And I think that the younger generation, the gay culture doesn't want to think about it. They want to forget it happened. So that's why it's all about marriage. It's about

marriage and children and benefits and it's not about those people who have sex, and sex kills. We've really been effaced and I think it's only going to get worse.

[00:56:18]

KG: Do you see that in undergraduates here?

RD: I don't talk to them enough about it to know. I mean, the couple that I've talked to, one in particular, the level of naïveté about what causes what and what the general risks are was astonishing to me. I'm like, "How can you not know this stuff?" You know? And I had to talk to him about the relative risks with blowjobs, how HIV is transmitted, the relative risks in catching it. I'm thinking, "You're 21 years old and you're, how did you not know this?" And they don't. And I... The level of misin-- it seems like there used to be these massive public campaigns that you couldn't miss. And I don't see them anymore.

KG: Yeah. We don't really have anything like that I don't think.

RD: Yeah, it's all gone. And people just don't know.

KG: Yeah. And there's always the arguments about whether anything should be taught in schools so then we're left to, I don't know, what we can find on the internet I guess.

RD: Yeah and the stuff that people, the number of I've seen, you see them on Craigslist or something, who are like, "Well, you know, I only, I do bareback but only with people who are negative." Are you an idiot? Like, seriously? So I don't know. I mean it's, I see older people in the city who I've known, one of them I used to date a thousand years ago. There's this new legacy walk that they put in on Halsted Street. Do you know about it?

KG: I've heard a little about it but I've never gone.

RD: It's twenty two bronze, brass, I think they're probably brass plaques honoring different gay figures through history and they put them up on those rainbow pylons that go up and down the street. So it's, it's the first public gay history kind of thing like that that ever went in. But the people who were doing it are all people who are my age and ten years older. I don't know what younger people are doing. I think they're just circling the wagons in a very conservative way around the idea of marriage and full rights and I think that they feel that they are essentially different than us, in ways that are positive and ways that are decent and moral. And like that somehow we were, rather than deal with the fact that sex is tricky always, they want to not think about it and subsume it under the idea of marriage.

KG: Yeah. It's much easier to get under the banner of 2.1 kids and a dog.

RD: Yeah. So you know, it's... Yeah I feel sort of still on the margin. Well.

KG: I'm just going to look over my questions and make sure I didn't miss anything really important.

RD: Sure. That's fine. I'm in no hurry. What time is it?

KG: It's, uh, 20 after 4?

RD: OK, I'm fine if you're fine.

KG: Yeah. Just here to talk to you today. If you have anything that you want talk about that I'm not asking about, feel free to bring that up.

RD: OK.

[It starts raining; KG and RD talk about the weather.]

[1:00:15]

KG: Oh, one thing that I didn't really ask you explicitly was if you ever, if you had any problems with your academic life as an undergraduate. I guess we've established that the housing system was a big problem for you and having to have separate lives, but did being gay ever bleed into your academic life in a negative way?

RD: I mean, in the sense that that made me, that that alienated me from the place, yeah. I think, I think the sense of my, I mean I came already for a number of reasons feeling why I didn't fit: too poor and too ignorant. And I think gay was just one more affirmation that this wasn't my world and I think the problems that I had dealing with material, which everyone has, because of that were very easily attributed to the idea that I'm not supposed to be this person. So if I have problems with it, that's just a sign that I have overstepped my boundaries. I went into a privileged world where I don't belong. On the one hand there was that. But then on the other hand, now that I think about it, this whole Howard and Roger thing, other students were busy doing whatever with this, with their work, and I was off at the Lyric Opera or I was off at country house parties in Michigan. Or I was at the film festival at openings. So on the one hand I was actually having this very grand cultural life in the city, which had everything to do with being gay. You know, it was my entree into all sorts of things. But down here, it had no cache. Down here it was all about doing kind of collegiate socialization where I was mostly uncomfortable being gay.

KG: Yeah. You didn't really have any social currency, I guess, if you're not doing things on campus, but you're doing fabulous things elsewhere.

RD: Yeah. So I mean the friends that I had down here were an interesting, eclectic crowd. And I guess after that horrible second year, the people I came out to were not surprised. They were like, "Oh, I thought you had something important to tell me." My friend who was gay who I had lied about, about it to him, I told him I wasn't gay, I just like to go dancing. And his feeling was, "If he says he's not gay, he's not gay." And other people

were like, “Oh we know he’s gay.” I went over to their house one time and they had a poster of the Supremes over the couch and I squealed: “[Gasp] The Supremes?! I love the Supremes!” “We told you, we told you, we told you he’s gay.” I was wearing sandals. Apparently this was a sign. In 1983 or whatever it was. And he was like, “No if he says he’s not gay, if he wants to tell us he’s gay then fine. Then we go with it. Until then, no.” And he had this really strong ethical way of treating the situation that I think was very, very helpful. And I could talk to him about all kinds of things, he never pushed anything and he was delightful to come out to. You know, very embracing. I mean, we’re still friends. He lives in New York now. I go off and visit him on Fire Island and dance around. So that helped. I guess you know I never understood, part of me thought I didn’t fit in here because I had my own issues about not really fitting. But talking to friends later who were part of my smaller social world, they were very critical of the social universe of this place. And you know indicated to me that we had mapped out a very different kind of intellectual and aesthetic universe than what most people were living. For me to judge it and think it was what we had, they’re like, “No, we did this separately.” Because none of us fit in that and I guess I never really saw that, particularly. So I don’t know, that makes it hard for me to get a vision of what in general the place was.

KG: That’s ok.

RD: Yeah. I’d kind of go through my courses and I was just so bewildered. I just didn’t understand what the purpose of the whole education was, I didn’t understand how to read the books, I didn’t, I didn’t, I just didn’t know what any of it was for. So many people who are here were sort of raised with it so it was just an extension of who they were, a sophistication of it. For me it was just all very strange. And to this day it remains strange to me. Apparently after so many years here as an undergraduate and as this and you know this is my ninth year teaching if you count my preceptorship, I guess I kind of am the institution in that sense? I’m taught by it, I’ve been reproducing it extensively with great success. So like, apparently it’s me.

KG: It snuck into you.

RD: It snuck into me. So I guess I am, you know. The disconnect is sort of hilarious at this point, if there should be one.

KG: Yeah. I don’t think that’s that uncommon here though.

RD: I think you’re right. Because I’m thinking the professors that I know that I most respect and have worked with, I’ll ask them, I’ll ask my advisors, “What do you think you’re doing when you do what you do? What is that?” And they’re very honest, they’re like, it takes them a minute to reassemble the sentence and they’re like, “Um, Ok.” And I say, “Why do you do what you do?” And they’re really thoughtful about it. But it seems like most people that I, are doing work that is well regarded kind of just do whatever they damn well please. “I do it because I like this and I’m not going to worry about that other stuff.” I think, “Really?” And that seems to be one of the U of C things, is that people who are successful just do whatever they damn well please and make a good case for it,

make a compelling case. But then the disciplinary training is all about speaking to the conversation, pleasing, right? It's this whole way in which you are configuring yourself for an institution but the successful people are the ones who don't, who never do that but then tell you you should do that so you can get a job. I find that a little dishonorable.

KG: Yeah. Yeah I know exactly what you're talking about.

RD: Right?

KG: But as an undergraduate I haven't made anything of it yet.

RD: Yeah. I think part of it is just the shift in university culture too. It's so corporate now. I mean the administrative class has come to its ascendancy and they are just taking over everything. And they are really confused about the kinds of things that drive inquiry. And they're clutching this kind of pragmatism that is hideous and really damaging. I don't know. The other thing that I'm interested in is the way, how status works. And this is something I was trying to write about in my dissertation too was this way in which these sort of formal gestures in thinking and writing which only reproduce institutional status have become the dominant qualities. It's not about thinking anything. It's about summoning, reproducing, and repackaging status based gestures in order to give it to yourself. It's all surface. Or there's a lot of surface in a really bizarre way. And it seems like sort of where, whatever the cultural status of this middle class, upper middle class is, it's everybody. But it's kind of nuts you know? I see my students scrambling, and I tutor too and I've got kids who are like grade school through high school and I'm looking at the degree to which everyone is concerned about presenting their identity in order to get the pass into the golden world. They all want the golden ticket from Willy Wonka. And everyone has been told that if you don't get the golden ticket, horrible things are waiting for you. You must get into that school, you must get that internship, you must get into that law firm, you must right? Because if you don't there's some sort of horrible, like killing the cows for McDonald's or something idea that everyone has. It's either one or the other, there's no other way to chart it. And everyone is running scared.

I think to go back to the gay thing, I think having been on the losing side, if you were gay that was it. You were fucked. You know, you were some like freaky, perverted thing but you were having a damn good time and you realize that that was a shell game. So I think part of the joy of being gay was finding out that that whole set of rules was a load of shit but people who had sort of the entry qualifications, "Oh we're straight, oh we're these things," they couldn't see it. Because they thought if they just played right, they would win all the cookies. And they often did. We just figured that we weren't going to get any cookies anyhow so who gives a shit. And we ended up actually having really interesting lives. And in that way gay was great. You know, you pay a price. But you know, it was a very vital price. We're still vital. The other thing too with sex, I distinctly remember friends in the 80s who had gay friends really admired us for our ability to negotiate sex in interesting and thrilling ways and to build relationships that weren't just based on the idea of monogamous heterosexual marriage. So for them, we were this sort of experiment that they thought, "How come we have to be in these sort of relationships? If the boys are

doing, figuring it out differently and the girls are figuring it out differently, maybe we can adapt their models to have, to figure out new different ways of raising children or leading sexual lives or coupling or tripling or whatever it is that we're going to do." And that's gone. Like now everyone wants to be on the marriage bandwagon and it's a damn shame. I don't even know what to think about it now. I think it's hard to look at a world where all these things that you did were so exciting and so valuable and so thrilling and so easy and now they're all, there's all this horrible moral crap that's piled onto everything. I'm like, "Really?" It used to be so fun. You know?

KG: Yeah.

RD: So I don't know. What other questions? What have I missed.

[01:12:40]

KG: Um... Where did you meet people here? Did you meet people—

RD: Fourth Floor Regenstein.

KG: Oh OK. This sounds like a story.

RD: Fourth floor Regenstein. No that's where people, that's where the gays went. If you went to the fourth floor Regenstein and sat at the tables, there was a good chance. And there was a lot of looking around and nervous shuffling and peering and stopping and looking over your shoulder constantly. That was the thing. The bathrooms were busy. I remember one time, there used to be a bathroom, I don't even know where it is. They closed it but I don't even know where the space is. When you go into Harper Reading Room, not through the door that leads into the café but the other side, those doors were always locked. That was the original entrance and apparently, I heard that they changed it from there to the other one in the '60s when there was the problem of students taking over buildings because that was where all the administrative, the high administrative offices were. So they just shut that down. They just sort of walled that area off. That's what I heard, I don't know if it's true. But anyhow that used to be the main entrance to the library and there was this huge bathroom right there, just outside and no one knew. No one would go there or knew about it. So that was a place where you would go for trysting. I remember going in one time trying to hunt somebody up, just to see if anybody was there. No one was. And I walked into the back stall and the entire, the wall, the whole thing was covered in this fascinating gay leather sex mural.

KG: Wow.

RD: With a giant Sharpie. The entire stall was completely done. It was fantastic.

KG: That's amazing.

RD: It was really amazing. It was really amazing. But no, bathroom sex was big.

KG: Yeah, we've heard a lot of people say the basement of Wieboldt was where to go for the bathrooms.

RD: Wieboldt basement... Cobb basement was big. Wieboldt. Does it have a basement?

KG: I don't know. I've never, well this isn't really...

RD: Cobb basement. There's a website, I don't know if it's still, I never. There's a website where you can go to find public sex places. And a number of spaces of the University were listed.

KG: Oh really?

RD: And the University got, figured it out and started going after them. So there's a sign on the basement, on the men's room in Cobb basement explaining that that bathroom closes at 5 pm. And they lock it. Because that was a notorious place.

KG: Wow. I had no idea.

RD: Yeah.

KG: I haven't been to a lot of men's bathrooms, so.

RD: Yeah, that's probably just as well. You still see like, like the Divinity School I still see the occasional scribbles up there on the walls but that, I mean, bathroom sex was sort of one of the things people did. The Wooded Island was notoriously a gay cruising ground, mostly for black men.

KG: In Jackson Park?

RD: Yeah. And it had been a gay spot since the '40s? There used to be a teahouse there, a Japanese teahouse was left over from the Columbian exposition and Roger Weiss, the old economics professor, used to talk about cruising at the teahouse because he grew up in the neighborhood in the '40s. So it had been a gay spot, you know, for decades. And I used to go for walks down there and there were a number of times when I would have black guys come up to me like, "Heeey." And it was, it was a little dodgy but I think, there was a way in which as a gay spot, other people stayed away. So it had that kind of safety. It was always weird because it still, I don't know if it still is, but it always was a spot where migratory birds would stop on their paths. So it's a birding place. And there were always these weird confrontations of bird, like bird watchers and gay cruisers kind of crashing into each other and kind of looking at each other and then, you know everyone knew everyone was there and it was just like, "Oh. One of those." And then they'd go our separate ways. So.

KG: The birds are still there.

RD: The birds are still there, the gays probably not so much.

KG: Yeah. I don't think so.

RD: Yeah. So that was notorious. Where else did people go? I picked people up in the Regenstein a bunch of times.

KG: I knew there was a reason I was drawn to the fourth floor.

RD: Yeah. That was probably some leftover smells and karma.

KG: Yeah sexual energy that's just up there.

RD: Oh god it was so twitchy, you couldn't get anything done. So, so twitchy. I had this one graduate student take me home with him one time and he was some big, bearded curly haired, muscley thing and I was like, "Ooooooh." Shrieking little gamine creature. And that was actually the first time I got fucked. And I had never done it and I thought, "[mumbles] I don't know." And he's like, just pounding and I was just, ankles were by my ears and it hurt like hell. He's sweating like crazy and it's pouring on me in my eyes and he's like, "Guys like it when I fuck 'em cuz I sweat and they think it's hot." And I'm thinking, [in a very high voice] "Um, why is this fun?" But I figured, all right, I guess this is it. I guess I have to get used to it if this is what it is. Pffft.

KG: I hope things got better for you.

RD: Eventually. I had a, I dated a guy who was in his 30s. I was 19. He lived in Marina City. I'd met him out at Paradise, which was, had gay nights. It wasn't a specifically gay bar but, or was it a gay bar? It was a gay bar. That's right, it became a sort of Mexican bar after and then closed. But Monday night they didn't charge a cover charge, so I didn't have any money, so I would just go and flirt with the doorman and get in. And I met this guy who turned out to be a professor of some sort, not here, somewhere else. And we dated for a while. And yeah he had this thing where he would like to, I'd sleep over there, we'd wake up, he'd get me off and after I came, then he'd like flip me over and fuck me. So it was basically rape. But I was too dumb to know, and I was like, "OK." Then eventually I would get tired of that and I was like, "I gotta go." It wasn't easy. It wasn't easy. I was easily taken advantage of. I was dumb.

KG: Well. It can be hard when you don't know anyone. I guess. I don't know. This was my experience as a young gay person was that I didn't know anyone who was older than me, so I didn't know how to act.

RD: I can see that. I can see that.

KG: I don't know if that was your experience.

RD: A little bit. I mean I was just confused. And that's why I think when I do have undergraduates or whoever come to me and seem like they want some advice or something, I feel like it's my duty, you know? And I, I think I've gotten very good at producing an avuncular energy. You know, I don't want to creep on people. I don't want them to feel like, "Ooooh." It's like, I want them to feel safe. I feel like they're owed that. I mean it's not like I'm really tempted to be otherwise necessarily but it's something that comes with, that I've learned with teaching particularly tutoring where you're just sort of alone with young people. This was actually an interesting thing I had to learn to do because so much about being gay and going out was you were always shooting your sex out there. You know you were always scoping on the streets for people, on buses, on trains. Like it was all about keeping that energy sort of flinging it's little net and if you do that when you're teaching, it's kind of fucked up. I mean I've seen people do it, plenty of times when they teach but part of learning to teach was learning out to knock that off. Like, this is just not appropriate in the classroom and you just need to shut that down. Because people are vulnerable to it. If you're flinging it around they get confused and they get agitated and it doesn't even mean they're interested but they're like, "What's going on here?" And I, it has been really helpful to be able to inhabit the world without it. And say, "You know, we don't have to do this. There are plenty of ways where we can have exciting passionate conversations where that's not sort of twitching on the sidelines." So that's part of the joy of young people, younger people is to be able to, you know, you can see their interest but it's not a sexual interest. I mean maybe it might be a little, but it's much more like, "What is this thing that seems to know something, that has something that maybe, that has something?" I would like to be able to be the person that can give them that something in a way that's safe and useful. Without them having to pay a price. Every time I got something I had to pay a price. And it, it was very embittering in some ways and I would not reproduce that experience for anybody. I would really like to see them have it, to know that it can be safe.

KG: Well, we really appreciate. Thank you.

RD: Yeah. Yeah. Well, good.

KG: Do you have anything that you want to talk about?

RD: Not that I can think of. I mean about this institution or about being gay here. I think the thing that's hard, there really is a divide between one's negotiation of sexual life and the kind of intellectual inquiry that's here. Both of them, if they're compelling, produce real passion. And it's very easy to confuse the passion. I think they do run into each other in really bizarre and interesting ways, which is why I guess students are always having affairs with teachers and even the most unappealing professors, if they're charismatic, seem to get these strange little bonbons of students in the sack. But I think part of the confusion with gay as an identity, or as something that's supposed to be in the classroom, right, if it's about sex, then what's it doing there? And what do you mean by sex if it's in the room? Right? I think it's a really odd question and a conundrum. You know? What is it doing here? Does it really belong here? And how are you going to perform it? Is it just this theoretical otherness? Because the thing, this is the thing I've found so irritating

about the political conversation around gay is that reason you're gay is not because you love someone of the same sex, it's because you fuck them. It really, it's like, that's it. Like, I don't want vaginas. Nothing personal but like that's just not, ok? And that's what makes me gay. You know I have very powerful relationships with lesbians, straight women, straight men, some of them I would call familial. They're as intense as any familial relationship, as any marriage. I've got kids that I've worked with for years who I consider a real kind of adult responsibility for them, some of them I tutor. Four years I've watched them grow up. I sit down and give them advice. So it's this kind of conversation about feelings, that gay is about feelings, I'm like, "Yeah, no." It's really about fucking. So if you making it about feelings and forget about fucking, because fucking is difficult and there are diseases and it's immoral. Fucking is still immoral.

KG: Right. It doesn't make a good political platform.

RD: No. Because everyone thinks fucking is immoral. So if you slap wedding rings on it and, you know, paper a suburban house in front of it, somehow it's ok. But we're still just fucking and that's really what it's about. And to deny is to, it's to do a great disservice. It's not helping. It's actually making things bad again. Because it's making the thing that makes us what we are dirty. Or shameful. And that's where I get so irritated. I'm like, "It's really not. You need to figure that shit out." But then, you know, in a classroom, here's where the energy comes up, if you sit down and say to a group of undergraduates, "It's about us fucking!" Everyone's like, "Aaaaah the children! The children!" and it's, how do you talk about that in a way that isn't disruptive, particularly to young people's attempts to craft that sexuality themselves? Right? You don't want to come in and overscramble all of those things that are floating around. You want to be there to guide and help and say, "This is this. I know this looks like some big weird Gorgon but really it's this. So here are like four ways you can do something about that or with that." That seems fine but it's, until we figure out how to manage and negotiate that piece, we're never going to get anywhere new. I guess that's my last statement on that.

KG: OK. Well I don't think I have anything left to ask you. If you think of anything, feel free to contact me again. We can keep doing oral histories forever.

RD: Alright. I hope you found it helpful.

[01:26:55]

End of Interview