

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW #37c
NEWTON, ESTHER (1940-) AM 1966 PhD 1968**

At U of C: 1962-1966

Interviewed: May 24, 2013 (1 session)

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Interview (May 24, 2013) with Esther Newton, joined by Holly Hughes, in Wieboldt Hall at the University of Chicago.

[00:00:00]

KG: I guess I'll just start with a little bit of information from before you came here. I understand that you went to undergrad at the University of Michigan, right? How did you end up here from there—at UChicago from Michigan?

EN: My family has a big history with the University of Chicago. My mother was an undergraduate here. That's where my mother and father met. My stepmother has a PhD and a medical degree from the University of Chicago. When I decided to go into anthropology, I was a history major at Michigan. I decided to go into anthropology, and my father, he had some connections. He was an anthropologist. So I met with Hortense Powdermaker and Carl Withers. Both were anthropologists and they advised me to go to Chicago to work with David Schneider.

KG: Oh, okay. And he's in the anthropology department?

EN: He was. He's now deceased. I got into Chicago, Yale, and Northwestern. I got full ride from the other two, but I still—when my father agreed to help me first year I was here, I got some money when I was here.

KG: What was the draw of David Schneider?

EN: They aid to me, “Oh, he has a lot of weird students.” [laughs] [KG: That's a little—okay!] Yale is more kind of an uptight place, and Northwestern isn't as good. That was the extent of what I knew.

KG: Did you have a sense of yourself as a weird student at that point?

EN: Yeah. Or they had a sense of me as a weird student. [laughs]

KG: Okay. Was that your parents or the anthropologists that they knew that said that he had a lot of weird—?

EN: No, my parents didn't know enough to know that. These people, you know, they thought that Chicago was more intellectually exciting. And that included a little more variety. But Schneider had a reputation for taking sort of more offbeat students. At the time I felt like I was going to go into African anthropology.

KG: Was that sort of what you did at Michigan? African history?

EN: I did African colonial history. And so I thought that I was going to do that. And Schneider had nothing to do with that. I had applied to Northwestern for their African Studies program, which at the time was very top-notch. In the beginning of the '60s, the money, it was like a spigot coming out of the government to fund strategic areas, and Africa was one of them. So the package I got from Northwestern was really cushy, to go into their African Studies program. I guess I wanted the weird more than I wanted—yeah. [laughs]

KG: How did you end up getting away from African Studies once you got here?

EN: Very circuitously. And it always involved, it was always bound up with who I was in love with. Or who I was involved with. I had dated African guys when I was in Michigan, and that's how... I guess my interest in Africa went back to *King Solomon's Mines* (1950). I don't know if you've ever seen that. It's an amazing movie. I just saw it—again, I don't know if you're interested in this.

KG: Oh, definitely.

EN: I just saw it again the other night. It's this amazing movie where they have this huge role for the Tutsi people, and I looked at them and I was like, “whoa, you guys are amazing!” You know? Plus, the romance between Deborah Kerr and Stewart Granger, I was all wrapped up in that. I probably imagined myself as Stewart Granger. That's how... I mean, the reason why people get involved with what they get involved with is usually so different from what they put on their CV or whatever, anyway. That was the reason. When I came to Chicago, I again got involved with an African guy. But after my first year here, that came to a disastrous end. Then I got involved with a—this guy who was this huge star in the department, Martin Silverman. His area was Fiji. So I started kind of migrating over, I would do social stratification in Fiji. And then Martin went off to Fiji. And while Martin was in Fiji, I got re-involved with the gay community in Chicago.

KG: Oh, so you had been involved [with the gay community] before Martin?

EN: I was involved in 1959. Which was after my freshman year in the University of Michigan. I went to New York and I got involved in all these gay bars and gay life, but it was this clash because everyone I knew there was working class in the bars and the

woman I was involved with had been an exotic dancer in underwater ballet. She was a wonderful person.

I couldn't figure out how to put together this working-class gay life and my own sense that I was gay with the career that I wanted. So it's always very tortured and complicated story, but... In 1964 or so, '63 maybe, '64, while Martin was away, I—there was another graduate student in anthropology... Cal Cottrell, who's dead now. He and I went out on a date and at the end of the date, he came out to me. Probably thinking that I was gay too. And that was the beginning of getting re-involved with the gay community in Chicago. And very quickly I realized, this was what I want to do.

KG: So Cal was your connection to the gay community?

EN: Cal was my connection. Cal had just come out. In fact, I think he maybe just came out to me, that I was the first one he told. You know, you never told anyone who was straight. You never told them. He must have thought—I know he thought I was gay. Which I was. We were like these little astronauts on a space capsule. He was terrified that if anyone found out he'd be kicked out of school, and I was too. So we—he was involved with this guy, wonderful guy, who worked for AT&T. And that guy was all involved with gay life in Chicago. Middle-class gay life... Through that, Cal and his lover Bill, I got re-involved.

KG: And middle-class was more your fit, right? Than the working-class that you had been in before.

EN: Oh, big time. I had come from a middle-class background. I wanted this career. The people I knew when I first came out were post office clerks or hookers. I liked them, but that's not the life that I wanted.

KG: How did working-class gay communities differ from the middle-class ones that Cal and Bill were involved in?

EN: Well, both communities were very involved in bars. But the bars were very different. The working-class bars—and plus, the '50s, the bars were rougher and tougher than they were in the '60s. When I was there in '59, that was kind of the height of that. People were always getting punched out, and there were drug dealers and guys looking to pick up lesbians for group sex, and it was a rough, tough scene. And in Chicago it wasn't like that. The bars, a lot of the bars were men and women. When the cops came in we would start dancing together, you know. It was just—people dressed nicer. There were no hookers. It was just—the people who went there had office jobs. Bill was middle management in AT&T, that kind of thing. It was very different.

KG: Were those bars near the University of Chicago, or did you have to travel a lot?

EN: No, they were on Division Street. The Near North Side.

[0:10:00]

KG: Did you end up involved in community life outside Hyde Park more then?

EN: I did, I did. And eventually I moved down there to get away from this, to get more into gay life...

KG: So it sounds like there were two different spheres that you had going, your social life and your academic life?

EN: Totally, totally. Except that while I was here, while Martin was in Fiji, I started an affair with another graduate student, Harriet Whitehead. We were a couple along with Bill and Cal. So there was some overlap, but it was totally—the cognitive, there was no cognitive overlap whatsoever. Nobody knew. Nobody here knew.

KG: So it was just Cal and Harriet?

EN: That's right.

KG: I think I saw a picture of Harriet in one of your books, actually.

EN: Probably. Steel-trap mind.

KG: I think it was *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*.

EN: Yes, there was a picture.

KG: How did you meet Harriet if you didn't ever really talk about it in academic circles?

EN: Well, back in those old days—there were ways. If you thought someone might be gay, or might be attracted to you, there were ways which used to be called “dropping the hairpin,” where you could feel someone out without making a commitment. I forget exactly how. And probably she initiated it more. Because I was—in those days, and still to some extent now, when I get in an elevator with a straight woman I keep to myself. I don't—these were awful things to say, but a lot of times when straight people see you and they know that you're a lesbian or they suspect that you're a lesbian, the first place their minds go is sex. And I just wanted to be in a box that didn't involve them. I was in a box that didn't involve them.

So in order to break through that box, the straight person, which Harriet ostensibly was, had to get out their hammer! I didn't put moves on anyone I thought was straight. That's also partly a personality thing. She pursued me. I didn't pursue her. Even though I knew she was a really a lesbian.

KG: That helps.

EN: That does help. [laughs] Let me add one more thing. Cal and Harriet were also David Schneider's students.

KG: Oh, okay. So this is your group of weird people?

EN: Exactly.

KG: Was there more lenience for weird people at UChicago than at other schools? Or was David Schneider just more willing to take these weird people under his mentorship?

EN: Yeah, it was that.

KG: So it wasn't necessarily a safe environment or anything like that?

EN: It wasn't safe at all. On the other hand, when I was here, I don't know what it's like now, but when I was here, the Anthro department was extremely buttoned-up. It was all men. Buttoned-up. When I was here, there were no affairs with graduate students that I knew about. There was a pretty big line between the faculty and the students. Everyone was *Professor Schneider*, *Professor Geertz*. Professor this one and that one. You know? There was no first name. So that afforded a certain kind of protection.

KG: That they weren't interested in your personal life at all?

EN: Well, maybe they were interested, but they didn't show it, if they were. I remember one time I was in David Schneider's house, and I met his wife, I was fascinated. And the person who really crossed over that was Lewis Binford. He was here with his wife, Sally, who later came out as bisexual. Who were archaeologists. They were free-wheeling—by the standards then. And they invited us to their house and they had a queen-sized bed with a mirror over the bed, and it was like, “Wow! This is so hip and amazing!” But they were the only people who were like that at all.

KG: They were professors and not students?

EN: They were professors, not students. Lew Binford was an up and coming really hotshot young archaeologist who made a lot of enemies.

[0:15:30 – 0:15:50: Interruption in the office.]

EN: He [Binford] was a whole different—like a foretaste of late '60s and early '70s, what that was going to be like. But he did leave here, I don't think he was happy. She [Sally Binford] definitely wasn't happy.

KG: Was she also a professor?

EN: No, she had some kind of adjunct-y, kind of, there was no woman in the department. The wives got—if they had any job, they taught just the undergraduates in some honors

program or something like that.

KG: So how did you feel about your future in a department that was entirely male? It seems like maybe threatening.

EN: Well, my undergraduate—I never had a woman professor either. So that was kind of how it was. I didn't really expect to have a woman professor. Or certainly gay professors, you know. And I remember when I had my defense, thesis defense, they took me and I passed, with the help of David Schneider, they took me out for lunch at the Quadrangle Club. Is that what it's called? [KG: Yeah.] And we were sitting around, there were 35, 40 of them, all men. And I'm sitting there. I believe Clark Howell was the chair then. He was an archaeologist. And I was sitting next to him. And he turned to me at one point and said, "Do you have any insight into why so many of our female graduate students don't finish?" I don't remember what I said. If I said anything.

KG: So they weren't really aware of what the problem was?

EN: Well, they could see that there was a problem that women weren't finishing. But they didn't understand that it was a problem that they would tell the women, "Well, why don't you get married?" You know? I was sitting there with these thirty-five, forty men who had just given me a hard time in my defense, and I was one of the first ones to finish in my class. But it was extremely problematic, how—and this is a story I've told before, but I went to, David always wanted me to go to meetings and look at what's going on and stuff. One of my dad's friends, John Murra, was an anthropologist at Cornell, I think, he and I were talking at the meetings, and we were looking into this bar at the hotel. There's this anthro grad student, very sexy, short skirt, chatting up this elderly professor. And Johnny said to me, "Don't be like that. That's not the way to—you know. Don't try to sleep your way to—don't try to be sexy and—" So that was one thing. On the other hand, when I got my annual review, David told me that they complained that I didn't wear skirts enough. So...it wasn't easy.

HH: [Holly Hughes, Esther Newton's partner:] Did he endorse that view?

EN: No. But he said, you gotta do, you know, whatever it is. He was very pragmatic.

KG: So, don't make waves?

EN: Well, I kind of see—the understood thing was that I was kind of off-beat, so I shouldn't step over certain lines. I had to be a little careful. Another claim against me was that I had—there was this friend I had, Chuck Palson, who actually dropped out, he never got a mentor. He had a motorcycle. He and I were buddies, we weren't lovers or anything like that. I used to ride around with him on his motorcycle, and that was frowned on.

[0:20:10]

KG: As being too...

EN: Too out there.

KG: That's a—that's a lot of different—I don't know, a lot of different pieces of advice to try to knit together.

EN: Of course. And when I picked my thesis topic, it was like, what? They just couldn't compute—the faculty is saying: “Isn't that a sickness?” They just—without David, I never would have gotten it. I had Cliff Geertz on my committee, and Julian Pitt-Rivers, and they had influence, especially Geertz. They recognized that I was very bright.

KG: Yeah, I wanted to ask you how that received, because it seemed like the drag queens topic would be very out there for the time.

EN: Oh, totally. It was very ill received!

KG: Did you have to get funded or anything for it?

EN: I was funded. But it was so much money then. David got me a block—we had block grants from NIH, and he could give it to whatever student he wanted.

KG: That's good.

EN: There was no problem. I was fully funded after the first year, when I got mentorship with him.

KG: So did your participation in middle-class bar culture help you with your field research?

EN: Oh, absolutely, because there's where I was doing research. The bars that the drag queens performed in were more middle-class bars at that time in Chicago. These were white bars. I think there was probably a lot of activity in South Chicago in the black community. But I wasn't really aware of that.

KG: Your master's fieldwork had to do with South Side stuff though, right?

EN: It did! My master's thesis was black working mothers.

KG: But those things didn't overlap at all when you started doing your PhD thesis research?

EN: Not in any obvious way, no.

KG: Okay. Well, I'd love to talk more about your PhD thesis. I haven't come up with any questions about it, but if you have any stories about any of that, that would be great to hear.

EN: Oh, graduate school life was hard. I wasn't happy here. That degree of being in the closet

is just very—difficult. Actually, I probably would have preferred to work on lesbians, but that was too scary. I used to subscribe to *The Ladder*, which was the magazine of the Daughters of Bilitis. Which was the first lesbian political organization. And I had it addressed to my department, not my home address. The department because it had to be—it was so important to be as professional as possible. And of course it came in a plain brown wrapper anyway. But that was just critically important. And to come back to how sort of square the department was then, I was able to use that to my advantage. Because people weren't allowed to ask you why you wanted to do anything. There was never any connection between, supposedly, between your personal life, whatever that was, and why you wanted to work on what you wanted. It was all floating out there, in the intellectual ether. So therefore they couldn't ask me.

KG: So the professional standard was that you weren't doing things that were connected to your personal life in your research.

EN: Well, if you were, there was no connection elucidated or asked for. I do remember at one party, and I don't remember if this was before I got my degree. It might have been after. David got me a job interview here, I believe in 1970. They decided that they wanted to hire a woman, the Anthro department. David got me a job interview. It was me and Judith Schwartz and someone else, I forget. The students wanted me. But the department didn't. So they hired Judith Schwartz instead...

So she got the job, she was a very conventional, feminine woman. I forget what her work was on, it was on some conventional anthropological topic. She got the job, and she had a nervous breakdown. I think they drove her absolutely—because she was the only woman! In a department of forty men! And I think they literally drove her crazy. She had a nervous breakdown, and she was out of it for a while, and then I think she got a job as an administrator in Bryn Mawr. She came back. But in retrospect, I'm glad that I didn't get the job. Maybe I was tougher than her. But it still would have been a terrible position to be in.

KG: What were you doing instead at the time in 1970, after you got your--?

EN: I had just been fired from my first job.[laughs] Yeah. I was fired from Queens College. I didn't get tenure. So I was looking for a job.

KG: Okay. And you were trying to stay in academia.

EN: I didn't know how to do anything else. I had waitressed once. [laughs] That summer of 1959 while I was in the bars, but that wasn't how—I wasn't trained to do anything else. But there were lots of jobs then. Totally different scene. So that would have been an incredible feather in my cap, to get the Chicago job, and as I was telling Lauren [Berlant] the other night, my whole career would have been very different if that had happened. On the other hand, I didn't have a nervous breakdown.

KG: Maybe not the worst trade-off.

EN: Yeah. [laughs] Anyway, it was for the job interview, and there was a party. At the party, the guys were—it was still all men—the guys were all getting drunk. And one of the big, big anthropologists started making kind of off-color jokes about me. And I have a horrible memory for names now, but this is a name that anybody in anthropology would recognize. [Ed.: Victor Turner] About why I had studied drag queens. And I—I hadn't come out. And I was petrified in place. And just got out, just turned away. But I never forgot it.

KG: That seems like an extremely difficult situation.

EN: Yeah. It was scary.

KG: When did you come out?

EN: After I got tenure at Purchase [College, SUNY] -- 1974.

KG: So '70 is well before that.

EN: Oh, yeah, well. Before I wasn't out. I was out as a feminist though, and that was probably the biggest reason why I didn't get tenure the first time. I was a militant feminist.

HH: Didn't believe in marriage. That was in her letter telling her that she didn't get tenure, that she didn't believe in marriage.

EN: That was later on. Just—I almost didn't get tenure as well in Purchase, and in my letter it said that “She doesn't believe in marriage, and she discriminates against male students,” stuff like that. But I did get it. Thanks to feminism, that was the only reason why I got it.

KG: In what sense?

EN: There was a big organization on campus—paradoxically I was a pretty popular person. And I had a friend who was a fabulous organizer, and she got everyone on campus, all from the secretaries to the wife of the president, to organize and push. I had the qualifications, I had a book. I had excellent teaching evaluations. It's not like, oh, she's a woman, let's make it affirmative action—I was qualified. But I was a threatening figure.

KG: Were you involved in any organizations when you were at Chicago?

EN: None. What kind?

[00:30:00]

KG: I don't know, did any exist then?

EN: No. It was before second-wave feminism. There was, no. Nothing.

KG: Yeah, I think Gay Lib actually started here, but it was a few years after you left.

EN: It wasn't here when I was here, let me tell you that!

KG: Did you ever do any non-UChicago-related activism or social organizing in Chicago? So it was academia or the bars for you?

EN: That's it.

KG: Where did you live when you were in Hyde Park? When you were a graduate student, did you live in the dorms?

EN: I did not live in the dorms, no. I lived on Woodlawn, maybe? Maybe.

KG: But it was an apartment.

EN: Blackstone, maybe? Yes, it was an apartment.

KG: Did that contribute to your social life at all?

EN: Actually, that guy that I was involved with that first year, he lived in the same building. That's how I got involved with him. He was a Kenyan. There were lots of Africans. Like Obama's father—was part of that same generation. I mean, Obama could be like my kid. I mean, literally. There was this whole influx, they were mostly from East Africa. Like [Obama's] father was.

It was all funded by the State Department. Training all these future leaders to like America, that sort of thing. There was a group... And in Michigan, too, a whole group of people who were studying there. And there is one more thing—you asked me about my Master's? That came out of an affair that I was having with a neighbor woman. Who was African-American. And she introduced me to a bunch of other women that she knew. I left out the gay part, that was not a part of my master's thesis.

KG: Did you meet her through “dropping the hairpin,” is that what you said? How did that happen?

EN: She was married to a white man. And actually, you say, was I involved in anything else? That year in particular, I got out into the black community somewhat with these friends of mine that I met in Hyde Park. For example, I went and I heard Malcolm X speak. And I went to some blues bars and stuff like that. I liked that.

KG: And that figured into your master's research?

EN: Oh yeah. Quite a bit.

KG: But then you weren't able to get any insight on black gay bars, right?

EN: Yeah, not at all. The women I was involved with, and there was more than one, they were married. They were on the down-low, so to speak. They weren't involved in gay life at all.

KG: One of the questions that we usually ask is if you had taken any gender or sexuality classes when you were here? I'm guessing that those probably didn't exist when you were here.

EN: Laugh it up! Nothing. Forget it. [laughs] Nothing. I did work on David Schneider's American kinship project.

KG: What was that?

EN: Well, that ultimately became a book called *American Kinship*, it's a very important book. And he got me a job, just after I had passed my prelims, which was at the end of the first year. That's how I met Cal. We were coding, you know, he had these interviewers who went out and they interviewed people about American kinship. Cal and I were coding the responses so that they could computerize them all. Schneider and I would always be talking about American kinship.

So in that sense—I don't remember if he offered a course, but I was involved in that project. So in that sense, I was thinking about, with him, about gender and to a lesser degree sexuality.

KG: Through the lens of family—?

EN: Through the lens of kinship. Which was a big topic in 1960s anthropology. The biggest in cultural anthropology. Kinship. His biggest innovation was to take kinship, which was this huge, very legitimate topic in anthropology, and apply it to America. That was the model. That was the most important model for what I did.

KG: With the drag queens, or with the—?

EN: It was taking the idea of anthropology, which is cultural study, and applying it to America.

KG: Okay. Was there anyone else that you managed to come out to when you were here besides Cal and Harriet?

EN: No. And I was very friendly with other people, this guy Chuck Palson. I was very close friends with Bobby Paul and Sherry Ortner who were also graduate students here. Never trusted them in that regard. I loved them, but it was like a different world, and you had to keep it separate.

KG: But you already knew when you arrived at the U of C that you were a lesbian or not

straight?

EN: I knew that I had this problem.

KG: And that was sort of as far as you had...

EN: I wanted to be normal. I wanted desperately to be normal. And I remember, I roomed with this lovely woman, black woman, Jackie, who ultimately married an anthropologist named Robert Netting a little bit older than me in graduate school. When Martin asked me to get engaged to him, I went to her and I was like, I don't know... She said, "This is your last chance for a normal life." She didn't say, "and you'd better take it," but—"if you want it, this is it." And she was right.

KG: Did that affect your decision in the end?

EN: It did. Well, not in the end, but in the beginning. When I said, "okay, let's get engaged." And then he was leaving the next week, so I could go to the department and say, "Look, Martin and I are engaged!" But I wouldn't have to see him. This is nothing against him. He was a perfectly nice, brilliant person.

In fact, I feel pretty guilty about how I treated him. It was totally selfish. Not realizing—I'm not really a manipulative person, so it wasn't that. I was so confused.

KG: Yeah. It sounds like there's some amount of self-preservation involved in being engaged. Sort of a mark of normalcy?

EN: Oh, absolutely. Definitely. Yes. Self-preservation, but oppression is not just outside. It's inside. That's the harder part to deal with. It's inside. I knew that I was tremendously attracted to women. I knew that my feelings about men were very conflicted and iffy. But the pressure was so enormous.

KG: So when you decided not to marry him, how did you deal with the pressure after that?

EN: When that didn't work out, it was like, okay. It didn't work out because he came back and it was like, he was *there*! And I was like, I can't do this. I was involved with Harriet, I was in love with Harriet, and I was like, I can't do this. Poor Martin was just blindsided. Because we had these letters—it's easy in letters. It was a painful situation. I'm sorry, what was your question?

[0:40:00]

KG: I was just wondering how you managed to deal with the pressure once you had given up on this normal life?

EN: I went into gay life. Inside gay life is where you could handle the pressure.

KG: Was it the support of other gay people?

EN: Yeah. I said, you know what? There were a couple of last gasps, maybe one, but not really. After that, it was like, I'm a lesbian. This is going to be my life. I couldn't foresee what that life would be, but I just gave up. I can't make it work with men, no matter how much I want to live that normal life, I just can't make it work.

KG: And you didn't really have any older lesbians to look to for a life model, right?

EN: Gertrude Stein.

KG: Oh, really! Do you want to talk about it some more?

EN: Well, I've written about it a lot. When I was in college, I discovered Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas. That was in my head—well, that's the kind of lesbian life, as an intellectual, as a writer. Which is what I was and what I wanted to be. That was—it was the only one...it's kind of upsetting to go back to all this stuff.

KG: I'm sorry! We can stop talking about it if you want.

EN: No, no, it's fine.

KG: Did your sexual identity ever affect your family life at all, like with your parents?

EN: Not really. Both of my parents were feminists before second-wave feminism. My mother never approved of any of the young men I brought home. She never thought that they were smart enough for me. Which they probably weren't. So when I finally came out to her, she was like, “Well, I wasn't born yesterday. I sort of intuited that.” And my father said—came out to both of them around the same time, early '70s. My father said, “Well, I'm sorry that you're shutting out half the human race, but it's your life.”

KG: That's an—interesting thing.

EN: That was a very common perspective. Oh yeah.

KG: I would assume that by being heterosexual, you're also shutting out half the human race.

EN: Well, of course! But actually, that didn't carry any weight.

KG: Okay. But other than that, they had come to accept this over the course of you not being married for a long time.

EN: Neither one of them pressured me to get married. Ever. That's not where the pressure was coming.

KG: Yeah. That's not so bad, I guess.

EN: Yeah, it was helpful.

KG: Did you come out to them after the tenure—same year?

EN: Actually I came out to them before that, a couple of years before that. My then-partner, who is a painter, Louise Fishman, she and I were totally caught up in the fever of feminism and lesbian feminism, and I decided that I had to come out wherever I could. And my family was, my parents were divorced, so it was two separate things. They never threatened me. They were very hands-off type of parents.

KG: And how did you say that your mom was connected to UChicago?

EN: She was an undergraduate here. And she—her father came and pulled her out of school. She was three credits short of graduating. Because both of my parents were in the Communist Party. She got involved in a legal fight that involved the Communist Party. She was in the newspapers. My grandfather was a general in the U.S. Army. So when he saw that, he was like, “You troublemaking... blah blah blah,” and pulled her out of school. And my—it was the 1930s. There was tremendous activism here. And my stepmother also got her MD and PhD here.

KG: What did your mother study? What did your mother study before she was pulled out of school?

EN: She was interested in genetics. I don't remember exactly. I think she wanted to be a vet or a doctor. My grandfather was like, “The only reason to send a girl to college is to find a good husband.” She was fighting against that.

KG: I suppose that once you get into the newspapers for fighting for the Communist Party, you're not doing that anymore.

EN: [laughs] She was a trouble-maker, my mother. She was a black sheep. She was only attracted to Jews. She didn't like the young, WASP-y officers that my grandfather wanted her to like.

KG: So there was more activism in the '30s here?

EN: Oh, tremendous. Tremendous activism here. There was actually a chapter of the Communist Party here on campus.

HH: Wasn't it like ground zero for communism and socialism in America, the University of Chicago? It was known for that.

EN: It was, it was. I'm not surprised if that's why she wanted to come here. I don't know that, but I wouldn't be surprised. She had—she was a rebel, my mother.

KG: Was your stepmother interested in the same sort of activism? Or was it just for medical school?

EN: Not really. I think she was more of a careerist. But she was pretty unconventional too. My whole family was so unconventional, and that's one reason I wanted to be normal.

KG: Just as like a rebellion, or seeing the pressure of being unconventional play out in your family?

EN: These things go on. They don't go on in the level where you sit down and go, "My family is unconventional, so I want to be normal." It goes on at a much deeper level.

KG: That makes sense.

EN: I just—I wanted—and you know, the '50s. It was like... Everything was cookie-cutter, married, children, the pressure after World War II on women, to get—and men too, in a different way. It was—I went to high school in California. It was so conformist. You know? I wanted to be liked. I wanted to be accepted. I wanted—it was on a gut level. But also, somewhere in that gut was the idea that people aren't going to tell me what to do and I'm going to do what I want. [laughs] Those were warring tendencies. Because once I said, okay, I'm not going to be normal, I never looked back. Never.

KG: Right, and then you went into gay communities, right? [EN: Yeah.] I keep on feeling like I'm making you relive past uncomfortable experiences.

EN: It's all right. Just worn out.

HH: You're working on a memoir, it's not that far from what you're doing.

EN: No, it's not. It's just...those were very difficult reasons. I was very unhappy.

KG: For good reasons, it seems like.

EN: Not intellectually. Being here intellectually was very exciting. Being around all these—okay, they were men, but they were so smart. They were doing all these interesting things. I just loved and still love the anthropological perspective. I just think intellectually it is supreme. It totally formed my outlook on history. Intellectually it was an exciting time for me. But personally it was miserable.

KG: Why did you decide to change from history to anthropology?

EN: Because history—I was kind of a bookworm. I spent all my time in history in the library. I wanted to interact with people.

KG: So fieldwork is much better for that than archives.

EN: Well, before oral history, that didn't occur to me, you know? If that had been more of a—I didn't see that as a possibility. If it had been, I might have—because I'm very historically minded. I might have gone into history if I, if that had been around, but it really wasn't. So that's why. And there were people in my family, like Johnny Murra, who I looked up to. He was an anthropologist. My stepmother, unbeknownst to me, had an affair with a very prominent anthropologist at Texas. So it was kind of there in the family.

[0:50:28]

KG: But it sounds like your parents themselves weren't social scientists, right?

EN: No, my mother was a dog breeder, and my father was a shrink. Well, he became a shrink. But when they met, he was an organizer for the Communist Party here in Chicago.

KG: Sorry, dog breeder just sounds like a great job to me. [laughs]

EN: There you go! Are you a lesbian?

KG: Yes, I am.

EN: It's a good job for a lesbian... We must be nearly finished.

KG: Yeah. I have totally deviated from the script, so...

EN: Well, get in what you think must be important.

KG: Sure. Let's see... So the gay parts of Chicago you were involved in were on the Near North Side? [EN: Yes.] That was the only middle-class gay part?

EN: Well, it was the only one—I think so.

KG: And when you moved up there, how was that environment different from Hyde Park?

EN: Oh, it was totally different. It was whiter. It was... I wasn't there for very long. Maybe a year, a year and a half. But I could go to bars all the time and sort of have coffee with people and stuff. Nobody knew or cared about the university there.

KG: Yeah. Was it better to have that distance.

EN: It was. It was.

KG: I remember reading that you left Chicago before you finished your dissertation too.

EN: I did. Well, once again, I fell in love with this woman that I had actually known for a number of years, and there was nothing holding me here. I was in love with her, and she lived in Cambridge at the time. I knew that wasn't a good idea, for me to move to

Cambridge, or maybe she thought it wasn't a good idea, and she was right. I was from New York, originally. So moving back, my father was there. I moved back and finished my dissertation there. And got even more involved in gay life.

KG: In New York?

EN: Yeah.

KG: Was it easier to find in New York than in Chicago?

EN: Well, I didn't do bars quite as much. I was looking for this middle-class life. But I got in with a group of middle-class lesbians. Actually this woman, Edie Windsor, who has this Supreme Court case? She was part of the crowd I was in—she was older, so I didn't know her well. That was the type of circle I was moving in. It was very closed. Totally different from when lesbian feminism hit in the mid '60s, like '68. Little networks of friends who knew each other and hung out in their homes.

KG: So before any kind of openness.

EN: Oh yeah, everyone was closeted.

KG: Did you keep in touch with any of the gay people you knew at Chicago when you went to New York?

EN: Well, Harriet, I see her at meetings sometimes.

KG: Did she go on to do anthropology further?

EN: Yeah, sort of. She did her dissertation on the Scientologists, and she was tied up for years—I don't know, they threatened her life, got her in court, it was just a big mess. I think she never really got a tenure-track job. She was from North Carolina, and she now has some kind of job at Duke. But she's not a tenured anthropologist. And I have to say, the few of us who were doing American anthropology, we didn't do well, career-wise. I did better than Harriet, but... it's still very disfavored in anthropology.

KG: Rather than things, like studying abroad?

EN: Yeah. It's still like the pith helmet. You go over and study the natives.

KG: Right. I'm just going to make sure that we answered all of these that are relevant...

EN: Don't rush on my account—do whatever you need to do.

KG: Well, I think we've done a pretty good job so far. Well, one of the questions that we ask is whether you think your experience was typical here, but it sounds like probably not, as a woman and as a closeted lesbian.

EN: Well, I think it was somewhat typical of women's experience here. And there were a lot of women in my class. It opened up in the '60s. It really opened to women all of a sudden as graduate students. There were loads of women graduate students. I think my experience as a woman in an all-male department, trying somehow to navigate my way between “don't sleep your way to success” vs. “don't wear pants,” was pretty—fairly typical, except that probably most of the other women weren't into the wearing pants part of it as much as I was. So it was more like, should I be sexy and attractive, or should I kind of be a steel-brassiered career woman? That's where I think my experience is somewhat typical. The gay part of it, no.

KG: Yeah. Just as an aside, was wearing pants a common thing that people did, just not appropriate for business wear? Or was that a pretty clear butch signifier?

EN: You could wear what were called slacks. Slacks as opposed to men's pants had a side zipper. They zippered up the side. You couldn't wear that to a party or anything, but you could sort of wear them around. I don't remember if you could wear it to class. It must have been you sort of could have, because otherwise how could they have known that I didn't wear skirts enough? So you could wear slacks. But I didn't want to wear slacks, I wanted to wear fly-front pants. But I think probably the first time I did that, since childhood anyway, was when I went to New York in '59. I had a really butch identity, and butches wore fly-front pants. The arcana of gay life in the middle of the last century. But the pants were still an important issue. You could never have worn fly-front pants.

KG: Did you keep up a butch image in the Chicago bars? Or was that more a New York-related, '59...

EN: Less so, because butch/femme thing was more muted in middle-class. Whereas when I came into gay life in '59, I was only 18. I was right away categorized as butch. I wasn't femme, so I accepted that. Gladly, mostly. The class stuff was difficult. But when I came out again in a middle-class setting, it was more muted. You weren't immediately asked, “Are you butch or femme? Which one?” So I didn't have to make such a sharp choice.

KG: Okay. That makes sense. Did you have—that's probably not a good question. Let's see. Has your perception of UChicago changed since you've been gone?

[0:59:50]

EN: Well, you know, George got here. [KG: George Chauncey?] Yeah. Whom I knew from New York. So obviously there was some action. There was all the feminist—there was all the stuff that happened after I left. And I'm glad for that. But I didn't go to my graduation. I just had a really tough time here. And so, it hasn't been a place that I wanted to come back to. I was honored when I was here for the conference that George organized in 1999 or 2000, and the library did—the library did an exhibition that was about my relationship with David Schneider. That made me feel a little better. But I kind of had a stomach upset the whole time too.

KG: In what sense was the exhibition about your relationship with David Schneider?

EN: Letters between us that they had. I'm sure that the library still has this material. I remember the letters. I remember Holly saying, "Oh, you are being stuffed and mounted." [Ed.: Like in a museum diorama.]

KG: Do you remember what was there besides the letters?

EN: It was mostly the letters. A copy of my dissertation, I guess. But the only person besides—I had friends who were graduate students, but I loved David, I loved him very much. And I continued to see him. I came back here—when his wife died, he sank into this horrible depression, so I came back to try to buck him up, and I continued to see him. After his death he went up to Santa Cruz. Without him I would have never finished.

KG: I'll have to make a note of his letters. I haven't looked at his papers or anything.

EN: I don't know if they kept a separate—but I'm sure that if you go to the library and look for me or for him, I'm sure you'll find that stuff.

KG: Yeah, I'm sure you're right, if they put it in an exhibition. Let's see, we talked about the things that you did after you got your PhD. Do you want to talk about your relationships after graduate school at all?

EN: What kind of relationships?

KG: Usually I ask people how they met their partner. Some people don't care to answer, so.

EN: Well, I had a lot of relationships after I left here. But I've had this one for 18 years.

KG: Wow. How did you guys meet?

EN: She stalked me.

HH: Is that all you want to say?

EN: I saw her perform. I knew who she was because I had followed the whole NEA 4 thing in the papers, I don't know if you know about that.

KG: Monica [Mercado, project coordinator] mentioned it to me a little bit.

EN: She—there were four artists who were funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and they were defunded under pressure from right-wing groups. They made the front page of the Times and all that. I followed all of that with great interest.

So I knew who she was, and in my mind, she was someone way above me. And then I

saw her perform—all this wonderful gay stuff goes on in New York. I saw her perform at a benefit. I was so moved by her performance, then I guess we must have been introduced—she put out the word that she wanted to meet me.

HH: I called you.

EN: She called me. And I misinterpreted it—we used to have answering machines? It was on the answering machine and it was like, “Do you want to coffee sometime this is [unintelligible]” I was like, “Howie Shoes? Who's that? Howie? It sounds like a woman.” I was befuddled. So I didn't respond. And then—[laughs] And then, some intermediary [Ed.: Karla Jay], called one day and said, “So do you want to go out with Holly Hughes or not. Come on, what's the deal.”

I was like, “Holly Hughes? She's interested in me?” So we went out. And that was pretty much it.

KG: And are you partnered in New York? Domestic partnered in New York?

EN: We are.

KG: Does the marriage thing interest you at all?

EN: We're ambivalent. See, I'm describing that whole gay life and being in the closet as being very painful. And it was. Especially when I was here, and in Michigan, because it was so isolating. Not so much in New York, because I had the gay community there. But it also had this excitement and romanticism. Being an outlaw. You were literally an outlaw. The police came, people were arrested—it wasn't a metaphor. There was a lot of excitement in that. It was sexy. So we're very ambivalent about being mainstreamed.

On the other hand, we're not ambivalent about, if she gets sick, can I visit her in the hospital. But it's not completely practical like that either. I think there is something to making a commitment to someone in public and having that commitment recognized, there is something to that. I expect that if it becomes legal in Michigan...hard to imagine. Likely we will do it.

KG: Did you want to add anything, Holly? It looks like you have something to say. You can go on the recording too.

HH: Well, I think, you know, we want the legal—we'd like the full federal package. At the same time, we... We don't like the argument that we're just like everyone else. So I think we'd like to decouple the civil rights issue from the kind of lifestyle—that's not exactly the right word. Of course we live in a place where there is no gay community.

KG: In Michigan?

HH: Yeah, it doesn't really exist. You can read about it. [laughs]

EN: If I weren't with her, I'd go back to New York. And if she didn't have the job that she has [at the University of Michigan School of Art & Design], we'd both go back to New York. If we could afford it.

KG: Yeah. Well, we can wrap it up then. There are some concluding questions...let's see. Why did you decide to be interviewed again for the project?

EN: That's a good question. I'm a teacher, and I'm a scholar, and this has to do with documentation and scholarship. So I feel like it's important work. I guess I see my mortality on the horizon, and I'd like to leave some traces of my passing.

KG: Okay. That's—is there anything else you want to add before I end the interview.

EN: No, I think that's pretty complete. And I hope you get a job!

KG: Thank you!

[01:09:38]

End of Interview