

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #82

SHAH, NAYAN (1966-) AM 1990, PhD 1995

At U of C: 1989-1995

Interviewed: 2013 (1 session)

Interviewer: Lauren Stokes

Transcript by: Mich Elliott

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Interview April 18, 2014 in Swarthmore, PA.

[00:00:00]

LS: Hi, so this is Lauren Stokes and I'm interviewing Nayan Shah on April 18, 2014 in the beautiful grounds of Swarthmore College, where we both are as part of a panel on the history of queer life, so it's very appropriate.

NS: Absolutely.

LS: Absolutely [laughs]. We actually like to start these interviews by asking you how you ended up at the University of Chicago.

NS: Oh, good question. How did I end up at the University of Chicago? I applied to the University of Chicago and several other graduate schools for studying History and South Asian Studies. And I chose Chicago because they gave me a four-year package with an advisor who was very hands-off and enthusiastic and it was gonna be in a city and I wanted to be in a city.

LS: OK, so where had you been before you were at Chicago?

NS: Oh, I was at Swarthmore College, where we are now, and I spent a year between Chicago, before I got to Chicago on a Watson Fellowship and I spent time in London, Nairobi, parts of India, Durban, Johannesburg, and I made my decision about graduate school while I was in South Africa.

LS: OK, cool. And what were you doing with your Watson Fellowship?

NS: I was studying Indian immigrant communities and race and religion and politics. And so I was sort of making it up as I went along, and trying to figure out what I wanted to do in different environments. So, essentially, in England, where I experienced the most

vociferous racism, but also the most intriguing sort of connections to queer worlds, I ended up working for a South Asian theater company that did projects in communities where racial violence and strife occurred, so it was community theater work. And in South Africa, I worked for a grassroots organization that dealt with a grassroots housing organization that was helping people who lived in informal settlements and was providing resources for clean water, sanitation, supporting elementary schools and child care for the residents.

- LS: Often, we do these interviews with people who were there for their BAs, but I assume that your kind of academic interests in race and queer communities were formed slightly before that, if you had that for your Watson Fellowship, would you say that was, how did that kind of come about?
- NS: I think my interest in thinking about race and ethnicity, in particular, and migration and diaspora had come about before I got to Chicago and certainly expressed in the Watson Fellowship and in my time at Swarthmore. I would have to say my sense of what to, how to think and imagine and live in terms of different kinds of communities organized around sexuality and gender emerged more fully when I moved to Chicago.
- LS: OK. So, I guess we'll go there. Can you tell me something about your social life at the University of Chicago?
- NS: Oh, yeah, OK [laughs]. My social life at the University of Chicago. I got to Chicago in August and I got there before everything started; at least a month and a half before I think everything got going. I started venturing to the north side, seeking out a gay community. I joined a coming out group, figured out where the bookstores and bars were on Halsted Street, dated a couple of guys. All that happened before I started at Chicago, but I was living in Hyde Park. I was determined to be out when I was in Chicago and I knew that if I wanted a queer world --or any kind of gay social life, I would have to leave the confines of Hyde Park and the University. I think it sort of set up that idea. What was interesting was, though, my experiences on the north side encouraged me to get pretty quickly got involved with going to GALA meetings and going to events and doing stuff on campus, parties and stuff like that. Mostly people, things that happened in people's homes and in their apartments and these meetings that would happen in Ida Noyes. So, I think sort of organically, a social world developed among graduate students and undergraduates at Chicago, pretty much my first year there in 1989.
- LS: Oh, great. What was the kind of composition of GALA like? Men, women?
- NS: Mostly men, mostly white. So, this is the thing that, one of the things that was most intriguing and important to me was the possibility of meeting, like what happened in London, was the possibility of meeting people who were both South Asian, which is my ethnicity, and queer. In Chicago that just didn't seem as possible at first, it also just seemed at first—to be out and gay, at the University of Chicago was to be white and male. And, interestingly enough, the graduate students that I hung out with, who were queerly gendered and expressed themselves in a range of different ways sexually were

mostly women. This community which was much more politically oriented and confidently out and felt more askew from the GALA community.

[00:06:45]

LS: Interesting, so the GALA community you would say was mostly white men, grads and undergrads, and then there was another queerly gendered—you describe them as queerly gendered?

NS: Yeah, I think there were a lot of different ways in which, from lesbian-identified, bi, butch women, maybe a kind of articulation of trans was emerging, I think it was less apparent to me in 1989, and more forthrightly apparent several years later. Of the range of people, who were mostly graduate students, some undergrad, but I was taking classes with them, I was learning about political activism with them. So, I think that was the way in which I got to know people.

LS: And then you mentioned that it seemed like getting to know people who were South Asian and also out gay people seemed like it was not possible at Chicago.

NS: Not visible, not possible, or not visible. And also, you know, there were very few people who were at Chicago, the University of Chicago who were Asian American or for that matter African-American, out and gay, and that seemed kind of intriguing when you go to the rest of Chicago. I must say that even on the north side of Chicago and the west side of Chicago, I think I only became much more connected to Latino and black gay queer community post-91, 92, 93, really it became much more effervescent after '93. So, it was like there were more, it may have just been about the clubs I was going to, or the places that I began to recognize, but it seemed like there was much more of a presence even in the gayborhood by like '92, '93 in a way that hadn't been as clear before.

LS: And you get that sense that that was, 'cause I know that you also moved out of Hyde Park after a couple of years, you actually get the sense that it was, there were more people of color in the gayborhood after '92?

NS: After '92, '93, yeah. I think that was sort of more apparent. But yeah, I moved out. Actually, I went to San Francisco for a year, '92-'93, and then came back. When I came back, then it really felt like there was much more of networked community. A South Asian queer world was available to me through cultural stuff that I began to do while in Chicago, but in Toronto. I used to go to these festivals that were done in Toronto called Desh Pardesh, and these were sort of originated by the South Asian lesbian and gay organization Khush and cultural workers that were involved with that. They just put on these really great events and I started going to them. I also went to other things that were related to Asian diaspora stuff in Toronto, so I felt like my queer Asian world...

LS: Was in Canada? [laughs]

NS: Was in Canada. And I would have to say that this was what was really interesting is after about '92 and in 1994-95, yeah, began to bring a lot of South Asian queer writers, filmmakers to Chicago like Pratibha Parmar, Shani Mootoo, Shyam Selvadurai, Anthony Mohammed, for various like film series, art series, AIDS activist events. I got support from the South Asian Studies center, the Film Studies center, Humanities Center to program and create exciting events at Chicago. I think that spoke to a tremendous change that occurred also about what seemed possible to do at the University of Chicago later in my time there.

[00:10:25]

LS: Yeah, there were a couple of film series and stuff being organized that I've seen documentation for, was funding and a center for gender and sexuality funding just emerging at that time, or...?

NS: There was no center for gender and sexuality, so, actually, there was a project that came out of the workshop series on gender and sexuality and it was about really creating, creating the curriculum in '92, '93, creating curriculum for intro to gender studies, which now I hear is a Civ.

LS: It's a Civ now.

NS: Isn't that hilarious? I was crackin' up. Gender and sexuality Civ.

LS: [laughs] What do you think of that?

NS: No, I just think it's great but — I think it's, of course, it's so much like using, rather than, I know that there's probably an intense struggle to try infuse gender and sexuality methods, projects, interests into every other Civ, and I think faculty valiantly did that, I'm sure they found the resources of this structure of Civ required that you would do that work. But let me just sort of say this, the workshop series was amazing, because it brought together faculty and graduate students from a variety of different disciplines to create an idea of what is feminist and queer studies. What do we want to learn about and how do we teach each other about it? I did a lot of work with Lauren Berlant and Leora Auslander and George Chauncey, who had just arrived at that time. With George, when he first came, he, Hank Sartin, I was on a committee trying to put together film series at Doc that showed in winter of, I wanna say winter, it must have been winter of '92.

LS: That sounds... I have a flyer for this somewhere.

NS: It must be, like, I think, let's see, it was my third year in graduate school, and...

LS: That would be '92, yeah.

NS: So, it was, yeah. This series was like a history of queer film, essentially. It was amazing and it was just amazing crowds, every week was sensational. We just did such fun and

exciting work. So, that was really very exciting. And, you know, that whole year, '91-'92, that whole year was just an extraordinary year. Activism, artistic activity, demonstrations, visibility on campus, it was absolutely sensational. It was extraordinary to imagine how much it felt like it was possible to queer University of Chicago.

LS: Huh. Can you talk a little bit more about what inspired that efflorescence of activism?

[00:13:42]

NS: Well, you know, I think a bunch of different kinds of activism that was brewing in and around campus. And some of it had to do with the politics around the war in Iraq, and the demonstrations that occurred both on-campus and off-campus because of that. And the involvement of students about how it was that ACT UP and Queer Nation politics were connecting people in different ways. People were involved in ACT UP on campus and I went to ACT UP meetings and there were a lot of people who were inspired by ACT UP that wanted to make change on campus that wasn't, was sometimes about HIV and AIDS, but it was more about all kinds of issues around visibility, discrimination, you know, fighting against indifference and violence that was happening.

I remember really, kind of elliptically at this point, but, there were a range of different kinds of harassment moments that happened on campus in '91, 1991. I remember a math student that was really a target, I remember other people who... I mean, these were people who, these were mostly men who were targets and of both cat-calling and physical violence. And I think that was galvanizing a range of different people. A number of us, by '91, became involved in struggling for ways in which the campus itself, the University, could address forms of discrimination that were endemic to its practice because it refused to recognize gay people, relationships, and so domestic partnership politics became a really important arena for bringing together students and faculty, staff people, but it was mostly faculty and students, and a few—many undergrads that were involved, and we I think worked on, different levels of campaign. Like, you know, petitions, letters to the editor, and different kinds of ways of making the struggle visible, trying to get Hanna Gray, who was the president at that time, to move on changing policy, and move on actually sort of adapting things that were emerging in other university campuses and corporations around domestic partnership.

Now the thing that was really interesting is because we had a group of people who were involved in these actions who were very influenced by a range of feminist progressive politics. That there was this kind of split between the idea of domestic partnership as as close to an alibi for marriage as possible, and for people who are really struggling with trying to imagine domestic partnership in much more complex and variable ways. I think there were a number of us who were really trying to struggle with the idea that if we had to sort of produce levels of documentation that produced domestic partnership as a recognized relationship, then how come we couldn't just sort of name access to resources to a range of different people without sort of making it come that they are sort of approximately our married spouse. And which I think the idea of gay marriage itself wasn't really on the forefront for a number of people at all, like I don't think it was really

being imagined, but I think people didn't want to imagine that normative relations were the ways in which people in their variously complicated personal lives wanted to be recognized. And they also sort of wanted to make demands on access to the University, and I think some of that also had to do with recognizing the ways in which people in Hyde Park, particularly African-Americans in Hyde Park were so denied rights to access to various things on campus, but also to sort of say, I can name and narrate whoever I think my dependent is, and you should just acknowledge that as the institution, and what's the harm for it, and the difficulty...?

LS: And so I shouldn't have to produce the documentation for this that is predetermined.

[00:18:37]

NS: Right, exactly. Or the documentation could be more complicated, but it was always about rights to sharing habitation and income and stuff like that, shared bank accounts and stuff like that. So there was this whole little process that was going on, I think the graduate students who were really so engaged by queer theory and queer studies and by feminist politics were really at the forefront of it. The little problem we ran into was the faculty, several faculty members, who wanted to—actually wanted to see something happen, and they saw an opening that could happen with compromising with the administration. So, well, this sort of set of activisms were going on, these mobilizations, and we were all building towards this pretty—

LS: You said there were faculty members also involved in the, this kind of coalition?

NS: Yeah, exactly. So, I think, I mean, there were, Chris Looby and George Chauncey and, I'm trying to remember this woman in Social Service Administration, Law School people, just various different faculty members. And there was clearly a group, a subset of people who were actually, I think we were doing a lot of things as a collectivity that was supposed to be egalitarian and stuff like that. We were working on many different fronts. The undergraduates and graduate students were really primed on doing demonstrations, so one of the most amazing things we did, I don't know if there's documentation of it that you've seen, but we did this mass wedding.

LS: Yeah, Weddstock.

NS: Weddstock, right. And it was the most wonderful occasion, because it was just like this beautiful, like bringing together of all kinds of people who were performing, you know, various forms of queer relationship, and some of whom were allies, some of whom were vociferously central to any form of LGBTQ community on Chicago campus. But it was this extraordinary drawing out of people, and really wonderful performative moments, you know, with people even dressing up as like, I remember Scott Mendel dressing up as Hanna Gray, and you know—

LS: [laughs] Oh, I don't think we have any pictures of that.

NS: We were, I think we were married by a nun, and, oh who was the nun?

LS: Was Beth Freeman the nun? [Interview #84]

NS: No, Beth Freeman was dressed up, I don't remember how she was dressed, I'm trying to remember now.

LS: There's some amazing pictures of her from that moment, but we don't, we want more pictures of it, but the pictures that I've seen are really celebratory and, like, clearly performative in this way you're talking about.

NS: It was wonderful. It was a great event. I think I might, somewhere I might have photographs. The ones I took. I mean, I remember people were... I mean, but to sort of prove to the point of the complexity of how people were performing then, what domestic partnership politics could be. You know, there were trios marrying a teddy bear, and, you know, there were people who were bringing themselves together as friends, as homoerotic compatriots, as people who had crushes on each other, you know, it was kind of complex, ephemeral and highly performative moment, obviously with a great deal of sort of seeking a lot of the kind of fun and subversive messaging that we were seeing in other kinds of demos. So, we were doing that, and we had this really great moment, and then it also did lead to the administration wanting to create domestic partnership politics, but in a very formalized, legalistic approximation of marriage frame, which a number of the faculty members were eager to and willing to work towards.

So, I think in the process, the students were sidelined in the negotiations and then, all of us, we didn't really appreciate being told this was the success, and not really agreeing with the success. I think a number of us were so excited by what change we were creating and where it was going that I think we wanted to keep on going with that, keep on pushing the envelope, and I think there were people who saw an opportunity that I think, rightly so, was an opportunity and a moment in which Hanna Gray wanted to make sure that—there was competition with beating Stanford to the punch on this, and Gerhard Casper, who was the former provost of Chicago, had become the President, of Stanford. There was a kind of complex politics as to why certain things emerge, but it did do something to deflate the continuation of an organic social movement on campus.

[00:23:42]

LS: Once the domestic partnership policy went into effect?

NS: Once it went into effect in the form in which it took, in which it also seemed like it was a brokering between a select group of faculty who were negotiating with the administration. I think the administration, rightly so, thought 'Well, the students are here for now, and then they go, but the faculty, we have to actually deal with.'

LS: They're forever. [laughs]

NS: Yeah. It's the benefits for faculty that were really a critical element to why they were doing domestic partnership, knowing how corporate employers saw it, how other universities saw it. I think, belatedly seeing, perhaps, the different ways in which it could also correspondingly benefit students, but I think, like, married student housing isn't like a huge thing that a lot of people are gonna access, for instance. I don't know, I don't actually know how many people actually, who and how people actually accessed those resources and what their experiences were, subsequently in '93 and '94 and stuff like that. I think it just became this sort of bureaucratic process that became part of personnel that, I don't remember any students really talking about how they were accessing anything.

LS: Now accessing something with their domestic partner.

NS: Right. I didn't remember that as being significant, immediately at that time. It may have become very important to people who I didn't know or subsequently.

LS: I feel like the whole thing was set off by two men and the partner wanted to access, like, gym privileges, or something like...

[00:25:37]

NS: Yeah, I think there were those, there were those instances that were being used and mobilized as ways of sort of saying, yes, there is an effective need. Yes, there are people who are really affected, rather than something that's sort of vague or abstract. And those situations were set up. I don't think they just happened. I think they were sort of part of this larger complex set of mobilizations, so people were actually connecting those demands with political pressure that was happening in different ways. Those things were interwoven. Just like, you know, I think the letter I actually helped write and which was in the paper was one in which we talk about people who are rejected from the possibility of having their domestic partner included, or the partner included in married student housing access, or something like that. I think that were actually referencing a tested case of some kind, but I think it's like how those, how any kind of civil rights project occurs, because there were different ways in which the system is being tested, it's being recorded, and then it's being mobilized. What the relationship between those things is often, you know, rendered uncoordinated for the administration and the public, but I think usually there were various forms of...

LS: Was a lot of coordination going on.

NS: Of communication, coordination, you know, either at the moment or retrospectively. People sort of pulling things together or noting that this was a concern. I think this, the concern for domestic partnership had been percolating for several years in different ways. It was often rendered as, I think the effort was trying to not render these things as individual, isolated problems, but rather as collective social struggle. There were both forms of discrimination and forms of redress to change those policies.

LS: When you were really involved, was there backlash beyond this thing you're talking about with the kind of sense that there was a deflationary effect to the final resolution, or do you remember getting, did kind of being an activist cause any problems for you in your academic life, or in other parts of your University life?

NS: Not really.

LS: That's good. I'm happy to hear that. [laughs]

NS: I think what's interesting, like, you know, it was one of those things where sort of heightened my visibility on campus, heightened visibility for a number of us on campus in different ways. What that meant was that, the secretaries and staff people and the people who are our peers on campus began to know a lot more about who we were and our commitments. I didn't feel for myself that there was any kind of backlash, personally, I didn't feel like there was—but I think we all kind of wondered in 1992, knowing how hard it had been for someone like George Chauncey to even be hired anywhere, at any University in the country, whether, what effect would our being out would have for our other...

LS: Your futures.

[00:29:33]

NS: Our futures in different ways, but I think it did feel more or less like there was a form of solidarity, both among people who were, who self-identified in ways that were similar, but also the range of people who sort of felt alliance to what we were doing. And so I felt that with very much with my advisors, who like, sort of noted what was going on and sort of and were very helpful actually when things were deflated. You know, they were very thoughtful about it, like recognizing what the political stake was and where it didn't work out, and I think that was really great. I think it was also really kind of amusing to learn how the history department secretaries were, and like, 'So I know so-and-so's gay, I know she's lesbian, but I didn't know about these folks,' and that was because the marriage of the, the Weddstock really did the work of like, confusing who was performing and who was being, and what they were performing. I think that that actually was probably wholly liberatory for a lot of people in the sense that I think it was that murkiness, that confusion, that not ascribing certain kinds of behavior, certain people to a certain identity formation because of whatever assumptions were made, or whatever other what individual declaration was made.

LS: Right. There's something, from what I know of Weddstock, there's something very performative, as you said, about it, and something that really reminds me of the aesthetics of ACT UP protests...

NS: Oh yeah.

LS: And was that, were there people had been, I mean, you said yourself, you'd been to ACT UP meetings.

NS: Sure, I mean, I think a number of us. I know that like Beth and I and Scott Mendel.

LS: Was Debbie involved?

NS: Debbie Gould [Interview #58] was, I mean, she was there—Debbie was just fiercely within ACT UP and That's where her time and energy really went, so I don't really remember her much as in terms the organization of this event, but definitely ACT UP, Queer Nation, and all the things we all participated in. I mean, and even, you know, even the Pride Parades after about 1989 became much more political, much more performative in a whole different register, and I think people picked up on that, and there were all these kinds of events and actions that occurred both throughout Chicago, but all over the place, in New York and San Francisco, and DC, that we were always, we were consuming. The Chicago gay papers, the queer bookstore, they all had like a huge impact on what was circulating for us. We knew a lot of things that were going on and I think people were trying to figure out how to do something that was specific, but in also, like, do it in a theatrical way. And a theatrical way that would be, that wasn't about defiance per se, but rather was about bringing people in to sort of appreciating that this was both a fun and important thing to do, or just grabbing their attention. And I think that's what the intent was. But certainly of our moment, we were part of the movement.

[00:33:30]

LS: I mean, another thing about that moment is that 'queer' is circulating as a word really heavily.

NS: Absolutely.

LS: What did that mean to you at the time?

NS: Well, it did mean a lot of different, recognizing a lot of different generational difficulty, or even for people's life circumstances, there were people who would forthrightly, I mean, I felt like graduate students were more forthrightly, some graduate students, not all, but in the humanities and who were more forthrightly like, asserting queer as opposed to asserting gay or lesbian. I think that there were a number of people of different generations who felt very reluctant to assert that and to even take up that kind of a defiant politics, and really saw queer as a shaming device that they were reluctant to imagine reappropriating, but I think for both myself and for the people I felt I was most connected to it was both used as an umbrella term, it was, it really did that kind of sense of being... non-normative, but more than that. Just sort of like, adventurous, sort of reimagining your world, creating the world you want as a world, as opposed to the world you're given. It sort of did more to sort of help situate certain kinds of sex-positive thinking and feeling emerging in the midst of the AIDS pandemic, and as a kind of, as really in terms of those mantras of, you know, 'Sex doesn't kill, it's indifference.' It's sort of that kind of sense of

reassigning where it was that the problem of death and discrimination were, rather than sort of forcing it back into a notion of “it’s the sex you do and how you do it that is the source of whatever calamity befalls you.” You know, that kind of sense, and I think that was really very appealing.

LS: Can I actually step, like, outside of the frame we’re in right now for the moment to get a, I have a sense that when you came to Chicago, you were already identifying as gay, certainly, when had that, to ask this, like, coming out question, when had that happened for you?

NS: Well, I think it happened in different ways while I was in college and immediately afterwards, but I think it happened on a smaller scale...

LS: While you were here at Swarthmore, OK.

NS: Yeah, much smaller scale. Here, it was really about, you know, a community of friends, and even then, it was very, it was not, I don’t think I was in any way recognized as being, or recognized in some way publicly on campus as being gay. I don’t think, I think that partially that has to do with the fact that I was, I think I was recognized in a number of different ways on campus by the time I got to being a junior or senior, and so I don’t know like...

LS: But gay was not one of them?

NS: I don’t know if gay was actually one of the component parts by which someone would actually situate me, in a way that, that was exactly what I wanted to change when I went to Chicago. I wanted it to be one of the component parts of who people thought of me, and what they thought of me, and who I connected to and who I affiliated with, and I think that was the forthright difference. I think at Swarthmore, it was hard to turn back every set of associations, the accumulation of years, all the different relationships for which one was visibly known in a way that was different. And also, it just, it wasn’t, I didn’t feel like it was actually a particularly exuberant sociality here at Swarthmore around being gay or lesbian or queer.

LS: In the late ‘80s?

NS: Yeah, in the late ‘80s, it was not, it was just not.

[00:38:21]

LS: So, it was something that you kind of were, and were publicly, but it was just not, as you say, a part of your larger persona, beyond yourself and your close friends.

NS: Yeah, and I would say, the coming out process was sort of heightened and kept on pushing at Chicago. I wanted to sort of emphasize it, in fact, I don’t think that actually, I think it seemed like it was far more urgent to do at Chicago and I think it was far more,

and I was doing it on many different scales at Chicago from the get go. And I think part of it was also living in Chicago. I mean, I think it was really about that as well.

LS: You mentioned that one of the reasons that you wanted to go there was 'cause it was in the city.

NS: Yeah.

LS: And was that part of it, queer urbanity was something you were...

NS: Yeah, I mean, I was curious about, because I think that the ways in which I even understood gay possibility from the vantage point of being a student at Swarthmore was about Philadelphia or New York or DC, you know, it was about...

LS: But you had to get on a train.

NS: You had to get thee to a city, and there's something there that you could tap into, but it wasn't enveloping in the same way as by living in a city. That was my sense. So, when given the choice between Ann Arbor and Chicago, one of the things I thought about...

LS: I was choosing between Ann Arbor and Chicago, and it was one of the things I thought about [laughs].

NS: And, you know, the craziest thing, I had visited Ann Arbor, I also had an offer from Berkeley, but I didn't get enough funding at Berkeley to make it worth my while, even though, of course, that would have been really appealing, in a way, although, but Chicago, I had never visited the University of Chicago. I didn't go to the University of Chicago to visit. I went to Berkeley and Michigan before I went to traveling, and then I chose Chicago without ever being there. You know, so it's this kind of bizarre thing to land up in the city I aspirationally thought would be interesting on a campus I thought I would devote this time of being a graduate student, but with a certainty that the city of Chicago would have something for me, would do something for me. So, I went to the University of Chicago, but I went to Chicago.

[00:40:54]

LS: That makes sense.

NS: Yeah. And I went to the University of Chicago also because it was just, it had, it was this intellectual, vibrant place, but I was not, after coming from Swarthmore, I didn't feel like—I felt like the two things that were odd about being at Chicago were, in many ways, I mean I had sort of taken community for granted here. It was part of, it was infused in my time at Swarthmore. Chicago, you had to make your community at the University of Chicago. It was alienating in different ways, but it was also just cluster microcosms of people, in different ways, so it was true that the undergraduates knew each other in a wholly different experience than the graduate students did, and they also experienced the

institution differently. And as a graduate student, I think there were, and as a graduate student who was an adult, who, in my case, I'd spent time in Johannesburg and Bombay and London, I mean, a city didn't daunt me, you know, probably should have daunted me a little more, but—I remember taking the El back really late at night one of the first weeks I was in Chicago and ending up, like, not at the station I needed to be at. I was like, beyond, you know, and then feeling myself being utterly bewildered by being in this like zone which actually felt a lot more, because it was abandoned, it was such a crazy area, so different even than what I was used to in other cities. There were parts of Chicago that just felt like they had been, that, you know, that homes had been abandoned, it was on the, what was it... Anyway, that's sort of here nor there, but it's sort of the kind of sense of, I was also encountering what it meant to, in Chicago, what it meant to live in a highly racially segregated, hyper-segregated city with huge disparities of wealth and poverty in a way that I don't think I had experienced before even though I'd been in places that were far more impoverished.

LS: Like Johannesburg.

NS: Yeah. Well, but, Johannesburg, yes. No, Johannesburg was probably a better experience in that regard, because there the disparities were both intense and spatialized. And in Chicago, they were intense and spatialized as well.

LS: And if I could ask, being South Asian, were you connected to South Asian communities in Chicago as well? You had kind of mentioned this queer South Asian thing going on in Toronto...

NS: Yeah, yeah.

LS: But, was that...

NS: There was a little bit of a... I mean, there was a South Asian feminist community and sort of a youth culture community that I got more in touch with when I lived on the north side. And that, '93, '94, '95, when I lived in Andersonville. I was much more connected to that world.

[00:44:10]

LS: 'Cause spatially, that world is kind of located up there.

NS: Yeah, and I think it was also because the other campuses, the other places where people were also part of the young professionals, the social justice folks were there, and it was a small group, but it was pretty interesting and lively and I got to know them. I also got to know them because I did a lot more programming on Chicago campus South Asian feminist filmmakers and writers and so because I did that through Film Studies Center and through the South Asian Studies group, people got to know that Shyam Selvadurai or Pratibha Parmar or Shani Mootoo was in town, doing something, and I also connected people in different ways, so that helped a lot, I mean helped to use...

That was actually the other thing about, you asked me about backlash, and I think in fact I didn't experience a backlash, I ended up experiencing the possibilities of creating opportunities, because I think there was enough of a progressive, liberal force of people who wanted to see different kinds of creative work on campus and they recognized it could come from different places. And as a graduate student and one with a fair degree of, like, 'Let's do something' wherewithal, which I think I got from here, college, I just tried to make things happen, and it allowed me to sort of forcefully create a kind of queer, South Asian focus. I remember bringing to an, I don't know what the occasion was exactly, but we did something around AIDS education and I brought this super fun, flamboyant South Asian Trinidadian queer sex worker slash AIDS educator from Toronto to campus, and it was, and he did, you know, he showed some films that were projects that were done in Toronto, he talked about the work he did, and Anthony Mohamed was a big hit, but partially it was people on campus and people in Chicago didn't necessarily think this was viable and possible, but they were open to the possibility of it. And there was enough resources at Chicago to make it happen. So, in some way, it felt like it created an opening, and I felt like I had that opening. But, you know, that's certain kinds of work. And it was towards the end of my time that at Chicago that really encountered South Asian queer students. And then, that was really, that was wonderful, that was just great. I think there are a couple people I'm still in touch with. But, it was, you know, the people I met and got to know had everything to do with being visible on campus and so by virtue of that—so for me, it was this kind of like how activism and visibility produced different forms of opportunity for me and different ways in which I could meet and get to know people, or they could get to know me or know to approach me.

LS: If I can take a step into your personal life, were you dating people also who were within this buoyant moment? [laughs]

NS: Sure [laughs]. Was it buoyant or was it dire, I don't...?

LS: Like, where were you meeting your partners?

[00:48:03]

NS: Yeah, so I was—so, during the first couple years I was at Chicago, I dated some people who were on the north side, and those relationships lasted for a little while until they got tired of talking to a graduate student.

LS: [laughs] Yeah, it happens.

NS: There was actually someone who was a student at Chicago, an undergraduate who I got to know through GALA who ended up working in labs at Chicago and I think was gonna pursue a graduate education there that I dated for a while. I was dating for a while someone who was still a student at Swarthmore as well, and that was probably my longest relationship and that sort of straddled my time in Chicago, he moved out to Chicago for a while, came back here, broke up. I had, you know, a couple of shortish but

fun relationships with people in Toronto. And my last couple years in Chicago, I was in an on again off again long-term relationship with someone who worked for the MacArthur Foundation, but who I met on the north side, who I met at a party, through—actually, interestingly, through a Swarthmore alum who was at Northwestern, and I got to actually, I would say—a couple quick...

LS: Quaker Matchbox.

NS: Yeah. Actually, now that I come back to it again, for a while I dated someone who was a Northwestern graduate student who actually had been a senior at Swarthmore while I was a freshman, and who I was actually kind of, I think we had both had this completely surprised, like, 'You're queer, really?' kind of response and it was kind of funny, about that, because we actually had interacted while we were here and in, while, I think I was trying out for theater for a musical, A Little Night Music here, and it was really, but he was in Sixteen Feet, so it was kind of, so we kind of knew who each other was, but didn't actually really connect in a meaningful way until we were in Chicago.

LS: Well, and you were a freshman, too, so I guess, like, queerness was still...

NS: Yeah, I was a freshman, he was a senior. I think, yeah.

LS: Yeah, that's swooping, I think, that's what we called it when I was here, anyway.

NS: That's what they called it [laughs]. Nice.

LS: So, had to wait until Chicago. So then if I can also ask about your academic work. How was that, your academic interests were evolving, obviously, while you were in graduate school.

NS: So, one of the first articles I wrote had nothing to do with my dissertation, but had everything to do with sort of connecting my experiences around being queer and South Asian. That is, I wrote an essay called 'Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History,' which I had actually performed in a way at Desh Pardesh festival in Toronto, and it was really just a reflection on these kinds of diasporic networks that were emerging that sort of both situated racial difference, diasporic culture, and sexuality. And, so I think it was a really important text that I wrote, I mean it's a really important article. It's been reproduced in all sorts of different ways, and I wrote that as a graduate student at Chicago.

But I ended up writing a dissertation on race and public health, on San Francisco's Chinatown, and really infusing it with questions around gender and sexuality, which I was learning about at the time, and I think it forthrightly began as a project around race and health, which had a lot to do with, you know, one wants to foreground my involvement and my interest in what was happening with ACT UP, with AIDS politics in general, but it moved very much in terms of being recognized and what I developed with it, an argument about queer domesticity and about sexual non-normativity and gender in ways that I think sort of set me off in a way that continue to merge my interests around

thinking about analytical categories of race and sexuality and Asian-American Studies, Asian Diasporic Studies, ideas about power and culture. So I think that that...you know, so obviously it was a very constitutive time for me in different ways and it definitely launched where I ended up going.

LS: Where did you end up going?

NS: I ended up, my first job was at the State University of New York in Binghamton, upstate New York. So I graduated in '95, I got the job that year, I felt like I was really sorry to leave Chicago at that moment, I really felt like I had such an amazing, vibrant, wonderful world. No reason to continue being in Chicago for as far as work, I was glad to be done with school, that was for sure, I felt very lucky to have a job. I felt very much in purgatory about having a job in Binghamton, New York. Fortunately, there was just an amazing array of lesbians in upstate New York, I mean, oh my gosh.

LS: Lesbians specifically?

NS: Yeah, right. So I was like a dyke tyke lesbo lad for a while up in upstate New York. I mean there's just a community of lesbian and bi women faculty members and graduate students. And I continued to, I spent more time in New York then I had a fellowship at NYU for a year. In 2000, I went to the University of California, San Diego, and I've been in California ever since. Now at the University of Southern California.

LS: I know, of course, that you now edit GLQ.

NS: Right!

LS: Right? With another U of Chicago...

NS: Right, with Beth Freeman.

LS: Could you talk a little, like, how does that happen? How do two UChicago PhDs edit GLQ?

NS: We were pondering that as well. We thought that was kind of wild that we both came of age working with, intellectually, working with Lauren Berlant and George Chauncey in that Gender and Sexuality Workshop at the University of Chicago with a sense that we were outside of where queer theory was happening. I think queer theory was happening, we reckoned, at Duke, at other institutions, at Yale, and yet, we were part of the swim of things, in terms of those first, lesbian gay graduate student conferences that were all over.

[00:56:03]

LS: Did you go to some of those while you were a graduate student?

NS: Yes. The one in Champaign-Urbana, the one—I didn't go to the one at Rutgers, but... But yeah, no, I think we sort of saw each other in that way. She graduated, finished up I think in '94 or so, went to Oberlin, for a year, then she went to the East Coast to New York to Sarah Lawrence, and she finally ended up at Davis. So, a couple years ago, Ann Cvetkovich and Annamarie Jagose were trying to step down from GLQ and I think they, they approached Beth initially and, about the idea of being one of the co-editors and then Beth, Annamarie, and Ann Cvetkovich tried to recruit me to do it as well, and so we, our idea was that we would really want to move, we saw the field of Queer Studies, queer theory moving beyond, you know, sort of cultural studies, psychoanalytic theory, film studies and into different disciplines and different geographies and we wanted to make that forthrightly what GLQ would do. I think we're rather successful right now at the kinds of material that's coming from people who are doing work on locations from all over the world, different temporalities, different kinds of methodologies, both different ways of thinking about queering archives and ethnography and law. That's been really exciting and robust.

I am about to step down from my term as editor, co-editor of GLQ in July, but it's been such a great experience to work with Beth. It's so great to work with Beth. Recognizing that we had this formative time together, but we have become our own people since then, doing our own work, so it's kind of funny, because I think every once in a while, we have a kind of memory reckoning about something from that moment, but we also have a dynamic of knowing that we can work with each other and, we will be also sort of our own person, autonomous, like doing our own thing reliable and responsibly. So, from the experience we had, actually, probably, at that time in Chicago, which I think we recognized each other in that way, and so I think it allowed us to kind of feel like this was a partnership that could work with two people who do different kinds of work, and have different kinds of interest and expertise, but can have a common way of talking with each other and also a way of learning, knowing that we can work with each other. I think that's worked out.

LS: Are you still in touch with a lot of other people from your time at Chicago?

NS: Some. You know, I think I've run into people in different places. Brian [redacted] and Wilhelm, I've run into in Berlin. [redacted] in San Francisco, [redacted] in California. I think recently, spending time with Debbie Gould. And so there are people that I see. You know, I think people are kind of dispersed in terms of my time there.

And faculty members, I still see them occasionally. I just saw Leora Auslander and Tom Holt in Chicago and I see George Chauncey and Lauren Berlant. I'll probably be having dinner with Lauren Berlant in two weeks. I'm going to be giving a talk at UC Davis, and she's flying in for a talk the next day. So, yeah, I mean, I think I do. And yet, that was twenty years ago, and so it's there as a sort of moment and network of a bundle of people in time, but...

[01:00:26]

LS: Can you speak a little bit to how you think things have changed since the early '90s. Like, what, do you think things are different for this generation of graduate students? Obviously you do, [laughs] but how?

NS: Oh, sure. How? Well, there's a Center for Gender and Sexuality, right? And there is this project, right, and I think so many of those things were very nascent, and they were happening without explicit structural support in the early '90s. I think they were all really nascent. I think people were coming to do work with, by the mid-'90s with George and Lauren and Chris Looby and other people.

LS: But that was just kind of starting, is that the sense that you had?

NS: It was just starting. I think so the institutional commitments are manifold since then.

LS: You said earlier, actually, that you were on the committee that ended up choosing George and bringing him and searching. Can you speak a little bit about that?

NS: Oh yeah, so I was. So, I'll say I was on the, let's say I was on the graduate subcommittee of the people that were—there was, the real search committee was a faculty committee.

LS: You had a half-power.

NS: Yeah, we had a power of essentially of being the recruiting committee. There were almost no junior scholars who were in the History Department at the University of Chicago, in which the only assistant professor was Leora Auslander and everyone else was like a full professor, you know, super senior, and then there were the crazy graduate students. I mean, a place like Chicago, it's ridiculously intimidating for a junior faculty member, because the graduate students are a pain in the ass.

LS: That's right [laughs].

NS: [laughs] Yeah, right? So, I mean, you know it's hard for the junior faculty candidate. The whole reputational thing; the graduate students who are like thinking they could have your job and do it better, and then there are the undergraduates who are just, you know, intense and impressive and very demanding. So, I think we were there to sort of help assure the faculty candidates that there would be interesting people here to be with and we were excited by them. George was one of the candidates, and we, I remember very specifically that a number of us just really made every effort to make clear to the faculty that he was our choice that we would love for him to be at the University of Chicago in the History Department,. It would make a huge difference. So, that was great, I think we were there to both connect to the candidates but also to sort of help recruit them and I like to believe that we reinforced maybe what the faculty themselves were thinking about who they wanted to hire.

[01:03:30]

LS: Cool.

NS: Maybe we tipped the scales, I don't know.

LS: Is there anything else I should ask or that you want to...?

NS: I think we're good. I think we've covered a lot of ground.

LS: I think we've covered a lot of ground, yeah. Has your kind of perception of your time at Chicago changed over the years since you were actually there and now?

NS: Has it... Um, that's a good question. I think I recognized it being a challenging place to be, but a formative place. And a formative place that I helped create actively. And so that hasn't changed, I think that my experiences there have sustained me. I find it remarkable that I was at Chicago for all those years. I didn't feel like there was enough of a demanding regulatory structure at Chicago. I could do and imagine what I wanted to do, more or less, and be able to maneuver.

LS: There was a kind of freedom?

NS: There was a freedom to do things, and I think that it was exemplified in the fact that I came to there to do colonial South Asian history and I moved my area of interest in my first year to US History and to studying race and ethnicity. I think any other graduate program, I would have had incredible barricades to that. And I remember very clearly the Social Sciences dean saying, 'I don't see a problem. Your funding is set. We chose you. If you find a mentor and you find projects, go do them.' I think that that spirit of the place sort of also exemplified in these different projects that were part of what I was able to do at that time and find different fellow travelers to do it with. And, yeah, I was happy to have the time. I don't want to revisit graduate school again, and I hopefully learned ethically how to be a mentor of graduate students from my experiences at Chicago.

LS: You do that now?

NS: Yes, I do that now. I've been doing that since I left Chicago, but I think I understood how quickly things change when you move across the graduate student to faculty divide and how to be attentive to and sensitive to what graduate students are experiencing, even if you have a kind of sense of how you want to train, shape, assist, critique the work that people are doing, and I think that's held me in good stead for the work I've done since.

LS: Alright, well, thank you so much.

NS: Sure, thank you.

[01:06:40]

End of Interview