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Out in the Redwoods

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Alan Sable: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz

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ALAN SABLE



Alan Sable at GALA meeting, fall 1977

Interviewer, Michelle Espino: *I am graduating from UCSC in the spring of 2002 with a degree in women's studies. Through the course of my studies, my interest in oral history has grown. Alan Sable was a professor at UCSC from 1970 to 1977; he was the first openly gay faculty on campus, and was denied tenure. Alan is now a therapist specializing in queer issues and lifestyles; he runs his practice out of his home in San Francisco. Alan and I first agreed to conduct the interview in my apartment in Santa Cruz. We had a great visit, and ended up having a long conversation where we got to know each other better. Yet, when I went to transcribe, I realized that due to technical problems more than half the interview was not properly recorded. We rescheduled a time to meet, and the second half of this interview was done weeks later in Alan's home in San Francisco. It was interesting to conduct the interview in Santa Cruz and in San Francisco; both locations are very important places in the narrative. The second opportunity to meet gave Alan and me a chance to think about the previous interview and discussion. This provided Alan with more time to re-visit what had happened in the past, and led to a more in-depth discussion about his feelings around his case and experience teaching at UCSC.—Michelle Espino*

Espino: Can you tell me about your family background and early life?



Sable: I was born in 1940 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. My father was a factory worker; my mother worked in the office of the factory. My father had gone through the eighth grade, and my mother had gone as far as one year of college in England. When her father died, she came to America and never did complete her studies. She was very ambitious and interesting for a woman at that time, and felt she had been cut off from achievement by her father's death. They came to the United States in 1929—not a good year, the depression. They were not poor; they were working class. Especially when I was a boy, say in the late-1940s and early-1950s, it was a comfortable, Eisenhower kind of living. My father was in a union; he had been a union organizer in the 1930s. There was a kind of stable lifestyle; at that time unions ensured job security, and there were good wages in that day, so we never had a shortage of food. But they both worked. My mother, especially, was socially ambitious, in that she wanted my sister and me to go to college and do well. My father actually was more intellectual than my mother; my father read a lot, and talked a lot about politics. My mother was interested in English literature, and would talk about that rather than her course of study in college. But my father was more political and was more of an intellectual stimulant. He was a very thoughtful man. I was very close to both of them.

I probably first experienced discrimination when I was applying to college. Although I was gay, I was not sure of my identity. This was in the 1950s. Like most gay kids, I knew that I liked boys. But I went to a Catholic school. I had read the one book in the library that talked about homosexuality. I just read it in the library because I did not want the school librarian to see me checking it out. Of course it was a horrible book. It said “it” was an illness and blah blah blah. So in high school and in college I was deeply, deeply closeted. Although I knew I was gay, I wasn't an effeminate kid. I was a scholarly kid, so I got some guff from other kids for that, but was more teased as a non-athletic kid. But, not for femininity; so I did not identify with that aspect of being gay.

I was applying to college, and had done very well on the college boards and very well in high school. I had looked into schools and my heart was set on Princeton. My mother and father really didn't know much about colleges, even though they valued education



and schooling very much, both for itself, and, especially for my mother, for the social mobility, for my father more intrinsically. My father's union had an educational officer. I went see him with my father and he told us frankly... I can still see him sitting at the desk; he said, "Your chances of getting into Princeton are very small, because you are from a working-class immigrant family." My father was an immigrant from Slovakia, and my mother from England. [The counselor] said, "A white, working-class kid isn't going to get into an elite school. But there is a way around this, maybe. If you apply to a school far away that's of high quality they might take you on a geographical basis." He suggested that I apply to Stanford.

So I applied to Johns Hopkins, Princeton, and Stanford. I got into Stanford with a very large scholarship. I was not admitted to Princeton and Johns Hopkins. I went with my father to Princeton for an interview. I remember walking around with a kid who might have been a junior or senior showing us the campus. I remember feeling very different and a little ashamed. They were clearly rich kids, and I wasn't, and my father was clearly a working-class person. He was too polite for example; he was very nice to this boy and very formal. He clearly wasn't this boy's equal, I knew, and his way of handling it was to be deferential to this boy. I remember coming back and talking to my mother about that. I said, "I don't fit in at Princeton," and I remember she said, "Oh, but they take smart boys too, from poor families." Even though we weren't a poor family, that's how she saw us. We were a solid white, working-class family. I think the reason I'm talking about this partly is that it's a similar case of discrimination; it's a very subtle kind of thing. This was in the 1950s. I think now a junior at Princeton might be sympathetic to this white, working-class boy, but then nobody was sympathetic to that kind of thing. I sensed it at the time, and fifty years later still connect with this kind of discrimination.

I went to Stanford. I actually adapted very well. There was a middle-class culture there that was very comfortable for me. Kids were scholarly and smart, and studied hard. I didn't have the high school problem of rough working-class boys making fun of me for being a student carrying books. Sometimes the kids would knock the books out of my hand and that kind of stuff, but that of course never happened at Stanford. I felt



comfortable with these highly motivated students. It was a good school academically. There was still a class of people I didn't get involved with, which were the more rich, privileged people. They didn't seem interested really in ideas; they were there more because they were rich. I don't know if Stanford is still like that, but at that time they had a whole contingent of kids who were there largely because they were wealthy. Then there were other smart kids.

I did very well there and went on to graduate school at Harvard. Especially in graduate school, you're hanging out not with the rich kids but with the bright kids. This was now in the early-1960s. While at Harvard, I went to India on a Fulbright [scholarship], which really opened me to what at that time were called underdeveloped countries, later Third World countries. I loved India right away; I was there for a year. And very interestingly, for my dissertation adviser I chose a woman who was the first tenured woman at Harvard who was also a lesbian. I didn't choose her for either of those reasons, but in retrospect it's interesting. I chose her because she was interested in Asia and India at this time, but I always got along very well with her. I would go to her house. She was actually an alcoholic, and would be drunk often when I would come for discussions about my dissertation and research. Sometimes her lover would be there, and in a very funny way that was my first model; it was the first gay couple I ever knew. But it was sort of negative because she was alcoholic, and I think her lover was also alcoholic. It sort of fit that image of those movies in the 1960s of lesbianism—it leads to horrible relationships and despair.

At the same time, I was getting a little in touch with my gayness. I was starting to go out sexually. I went to gay bars in Boston or Cambridge. Terrified of being identified, I would invent weird stories, like that I was just passing through Boston, these total lies. I don't know why I didn't just say I was a graduate student at Harvard. I would invent these stories in these bars. I would sometimes use another name. These weird ways of protecting yourself. Occasionally I would meet a guy and then go home and have sex. I think twice I saw that same person on campus and was terrified that they would see me or recognize me.



It was a deeply closeted period of fear when you wouldn't give your name in a bar, and if you bumped into someone that you could have sex with, and therefore be intimate with in a certain dimension, you would ignore them and look away. There was no freedom to be gay socially, and also no courage to be gay. I think it would be more drag queens who would be openly gay, people who weren't in a middle-class world, or ambitious world, who felt they might be hurt by coming out as gay. So my earliest experience of gayness was as a graduate student going into gay bars, but again, very secretly. That's how the world was, and that's how I was.

Later, I went to India a second time for two years to do my dissertation research, and then came back to the United States, and then got married. I was back at Harvard, and trying to write my dissertation, which, like for a lot of graduate students, was spending more energy not writing it than writing it. It was this neurotic activity. I was a teaching assistant at Harvard, and then I took a little job one summer training a Peace Corps group that was going to India. I was teaching about Indian culture and society. I met a woman there who had just graduated from college. I was about twenty-seven then, but she had just graduated and was twenty-one. [She] was one of the women being trained. I liked her enormously, and she liked me. We sort of fell in love and got married quickly, just in a few months really.

With my gayness, I sort of thought (which was a very common reaction at the time) it would go away if I got married; it was just a phase. Gayness was far less identified and identified *with* then. It was seen as something peripheral. People didn't identify with it, and the kind of bisexuality that people assumed then worked in an anti-gay way. It said, this is just a phase or something. That was my sense of it at that time. We got married and had a good marriage. She was a good friend and we had a good sexual relationship, partly because I think she was very new to sex, and I was very new to sex, certainly straight sex. She was the first woman I had had real sexual intercourse with, and we shared a lot of feelings about sex, and so forth.

Very, very important for me, and ironically for my gayness, was that [my wife's] first job was working in Boston with Planned Parenthood, which was then an "illegal



organization.” Abortion was illegal in Massachusetts where we lived. Planned Parenthood wasn’t technically illegal, but it was under a pall of supporting illegal activity. She had gone to Smith and was very bright. At Planned Parenthood they had this program advising women about abortions; one of the things the women found out very quickly is that they knew almost nothing about their bodies. Women would come in for advice, and ask these young women graduates of good colleges about their bodies. She didn’t know the answers and the other women didn’t. So like good, well-trained women they started to do research. They started to meet in our living room and I would be in the other room trying to write my dissertation. They wrote these little papers on their bodies, and started to trade them. That evolved into *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the famous initial book about women’s bodies. I had a very funny role; I would often make the snacks and things for the women sitting around the living room. That was how I was kind of a part of that book. I was the wife [laughter] of one of the women who wrote it. She became increasingly a feminist, as I sort of did. In a way, I developed a feminist perspective being around these women that, I think, not explicitly at the time, but ultimately, helped my gayness.

Often we read that the gay movement came partly out of the civil rights movement and the women’s movement; in my case it definitely did. Less so out of civil rights. I was always sympathetic to Negroes (that’s what they were initially called, and then black people). I was in some civil rights demonstrations. I got the sense of minority struggle, but the main thing was the feminism of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and of [my wife]. I didn’t initially connect it to my gayness, because again I was having a good marriage, with good sexuality, interestingly.

Then in 1970, I got a job at [UC] Santa Cruz. I was finishing my dissertation and started applying to schools. Santa Cruz gave me a job. [My wife] and I came out and we both liked it, but that fall was election year and she was very involved in politics. We were also both involved in the anti-war movement at the time. So she stayed back East to work for an anti-war politician. We drove out across the country in a Volkswagen bus and moved all our stuff. We were sort of hippie, radical like everybody of that sort. I



came here [Santa Cruz] and we got a little apartment down on Beach Street. Then [my wife] went back to work on this political campaign. I was here teaching. I loved teaching. I taught as a graduate student at Harvard, loved it. Increasingly radical teaching, because this was now the 1970s. The students connected immediately to me because they were very radical, and a lot of the professors weren't. But I very quickly identified myself as a Marxist and as a feminist. I just read that excerpt you gave me, [where I was referred to as] a revolutionary, [laughter] which now seems very pretentious, but that's what we called ourselves in those days, and maybe we were in a funny way.⁷

I felt that somehow to be honest with [my wife] I would have to acknowledge that we weren't matched because I wasn't truly heterosexual. But it was all vague and un-verbalized. [We had] a strange pulling apart. We left it very murky. She flew back to the East Coast after only about a week. Then at Christmas I went back to see her and my family. It was at that time that I said, "You know, I think we should get divorced." She agreed, was very upset about it because we were good friends and loved each other. I came back to Santa Cruz after that Christmas, and she stayed back East. That's when I first started to go up to the city for gay sex. I had been "faithful" to her during the marriage, and that sort of freed my gayness, the agreement to get divorced. We got a very minimal, no contest divorce. We didn't talk much about it until a couple of years later. I remained her friend.

A couple of years later, maybe in 1971 or 1972, I came out to her. Her first reaction was amazing. I'll always remember her face. She said, "Oh my God!" I said, "What's wrong?" She said, "I have to re-think everything that happened now." She re-evaluated her whole understanding of our marriage and our divorce with this new, very crucial fact. I hadn't presented the fact to her, because it didn't have the firmness of a fact until before I told her that. We have talked many times over the years of how my gayness had crystallized, and that's when I was able to tell her. Before that, it was a powerful force, but not a crystallized one. I guess it crystallized through the sexuality up in the city. I

⁷"Gay Professor Denied Tenure," *City on a Hill Press* 10/13/77.



would drive to the city and sometimes come home very, very late. The bars closed at two a.m. and I'd drive home to Santa Cruz.

At the same time, a few gay students and lesbian students were having meetings in the Cowell Dining Hall. This might have been 1971 or 1972. I remember I would go and look in the windows, but I was afraid to go in, partly because of just the general fear of coming out, and the fear of coming out as faculty. I was faculty and they were students, and I didn't know what that would mean. I can't really remember when I first did that. In terms of my memory, and this may be inaccurate, but I remember that those initial organizations never sort of took. They would meet for a few weeks and then dissolve. The meetings were listed in the *City on a Hill*, so that's how I knew about them. They seemed to never really coagulate. I remember looking in the windows at these meetings, and taking some courage from those students, thinking if they could do it I should be able to. But it brought up a lot of fear. If I walked into that room, what would happen to me? It both inspired me and frightened me.

I was co-teaching a class with a woman, Norma Winkler, also in sociology. It was a class on American society. We would always begin the first day by giving our assumptions about who we were. She would say that she was Jewish, that she was a feminist, and she was a Marxist. I would say I had a working-class origin, and I was a Marxist, and I probably said I was a revolutionary. She probably did too. One of the primary things we wanted to teach was that knowledge is biased and comes from the perspective of who is speaking, thinking, or feeling.

About a week before the class I said, "Norma, I'm also going to say that I'm gay to the class." She was supportive, but a little hesitant. It was a crisis in our relationship. We were very good friends and had taught together several years. On the way to the class, which was in Natural Sciences I or II, a big lecture class, a very popular class, she said, "Alan, I don't want you to say you're gay." I said, "Norma, why?" and she said, "I don't want to lose my job." I said, "You're not gay. I'm gay," and she said, "It will affect me, and it will affect you, and I don't think you should say it because you'll lose your job." I said, "Oh, Norma, that doesn't happen. This is Santa Cruz." Even then, it had this liberal



reputation, even though everyone was in the closet. We were walking over together, and we were sort of angry at each other. I said, “Why do you tell me this now, three minutes before the class?” She said, “Alan, you can’t risk my career because you want to say something.” That was her perspective, and my perspective was, “You’re just dumping this on me and you’re not supporting me.” We separated. I can [still] see us separating on the path.

Then we got in front of the class, getting organized while all the students were filtering in. We were getting our papers in piles. She came up to me and said, “Alan, you can say it,” and I said, “Oh, thank you, Norma.” I know she wasn’t happy, but it took a kind of courage on her part. I didn’t know what to do, because part of me was going to say it anyway, and then part of me thought, no, I shouldn’t do that with Norma. I probably wouldn’t have said it. It wasn’t a full-fledged endorsement, but it was enough. She stepped over that line of being willing to take a risk with me, in a way.

So I said it. When I said it you could hear a pin drop. As far as we have been able to determine, I was the first professor in the United States ever to say that to a class. At the time, *City on a Hill* did some research; we were never able to find anyone else who had said it. There became this silence in class, and then we went on to other things and introduced the rest of the course.

We didn’t include much on gayness initially in the classes. I think I segued from being a gay man toward my feminism, because it may be sort of strange to explain now, feminism was kind of a cover and a code for gayness. I certainly ideologically and politically thought of myself as a feminist before I thought of myself as gay. I think what happened was I was saying I was a gay man as a way of explaining why I was a feminist. I know we spent a lot of time in the class on feminist issues. That was a whole section of the class: women. I don’t think we spent explicit time, at least in the first year or two, on gayness *per se*. In my memory at least, that was a way of explaining my feminism. But it had an effect on students that was different.



Gay students started to come to me, both men and women, and said, “You’re a gay professor. Will you sponsor a gay organization?” One of the reasons I think these little meetings in Cowell never got going, or an institutionalization of it, is at that time you needed a faculty sponsor for every student organization. So, suddenly they were asking me not just to use gayness as a way of explaining my feminism as an intellectual thing, but asking me to sponsor the organization and help organize it. I did. So the students came to me, and then we started to organize. That made me also come out to the administration at least implicitly, because now on some forms I was the sponsor of this organization. At that time, homophobia was so strong that people would assume that you must be gay to do it; who would do that? It was a kind of coming out.

Things developed gradually and organically. The organization got very firm, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance [GALA]. There were no out transgender/transsexual people at that time, and bisexuals were invisible. It was “gay and lesbian,” and that covered everything. In my personal life, I kept going into the city. I started to know some gay people here. Interestingly, I never had a strong social or sexual connection with any gay students. I never had sex with a student. The entire time I was at Santa Cruz, no matter how out I was, interestingly I never had close social relationships with students. I was always in the professor role; maybe because I was the first out professor that trumped every thing else. I felt more in contact with students than other professors. I always liked students and felt personal with them. My gay friends in Santa Cruz weren’t students, they were townspeople. There was overlapping; sometimes we’d have a demonstration on campus that people from town would come to, and there were organizations starting downtown too, where there were more people my own age. By this time, I was in my mid-thirties. Some of those people are still friends that I made in Santa Cruz. But I didn’t really become close to any of students in a personal way, as a personal friend, or a sexual partner. My personal, sexual, social life was more concentrated in San Francisco, or downtown.

The faculty. Norma Winkler was in a sense my closest colleague. She co-taught some courses with me. She remained a supporter, but in some ways even she... It was



primarily the gay (and even straight students after it became a major issue on campus after I was fired) who supported me. It was a student-led protest. It was not faculty-led, although I do believe [that] behind the scenes various faculty tried to do a lot, because many faculty saw me as a very valuable colleague in many ways. Certainly as a very good teacher, and also as a good researcher; many people wanted me to remain, and there was a dispute among the faculty. The way the politics of tenure worked at that time at the University, they wouldn't put themselves in a kind of public vulnerability by being at demonstrations. So they would go to various meetings, and I think lobby on my behalf, but all that was very opaque to me.

I wasn't part of the "behind the scenes machinations" that go on in the faculty. I was very excluded from that, I think partly because of being gay. Even my straight faculty colleagues and friends were somewhat distant from me, more distant than they might be with a straight colleague, because I didn't have a wife, and have them and their wives over for dinner, and so forth. It was largely a matter of men who were married who had the power in the University at that time, straight men. There were a few junior faculty who were women. Actually most of the people I was closest to on the faculty were women, but they had very little power because they didn't have tenure yet either. So that was a kind of handicap. I wasn't one of "the boys" as I might have been if I had been a straight man. People I know did support me, but not in a... I don't know how to explain it. They supported from their position, but not as one of the people plotting or collaborating with them, which was common in faculty tenure decisions, I found out later. In a funny way, I was sort of innocent at the time, and didn't realize there were so many politics involved.

My gayness, I think, is one of the reasons for not having the tenure. I don't think it was blatant homophobia. It was just marginal to the social world of tenured people; they were again almost all straight men at that point. Even when there were big demonstrations, a few faculty did come and speak. They tended to be actually the more senior people, who in some ways were more secure, and probably had their own political agenda. The struggle of Santa Cruz [was] whether it was going to be a teaching



place or a research place. [Chancellor] Mark Christensen came to several rallies and spoke very strongly in my favor, mostly around my strength as a teacher. Now this is maybe getting ahead of the game a little bit, but after getting the quorum to become an established organization, the students took leadership in GALA. The students who headed the organization did most of the gay activities for GALA. Again, I was older and I had other interests. I was also involved in other political activities, like the farm workers and the anti-war movement. So being gay wasn't my only focus politically.

In June 1977, after all the students had left at the very end of the spring quarter, I got the letter denying my tenure. When [the students] came back in the fall, it was publicized in *City on a Hill Press*, and GALA started to organize around this issue. GALA made my case an issue, and also the Anita Bryant issue was coming up. They used that as a national counterpart in a way to what was happening at the local level. Those were the two big issues for them that year. But increasingly, as there were bigger and bigger demonstrations, and as people got more and more organized, my case became the primary focus of GALA that year. At one point there were several rallies of thousands of students, actually. The campus only had five or six-thousand students at the time, and we might have three or four-thousand at rallies, so there was an enormous support from straight students as well as gay students for my case.

After I came out, I really did not feel prejudice from students. Students seemed quite open to me. I never had any overt homophobic statements made to me. Students were quite supportive and liked me as a teacher. They were more open to how I taught. Straight students as well as gay students. I never encountered homophobia. It was more the faculty who had a distancing behavior from me. I never had any conscious homophobic remarks made to me by the faculty either, nothing blatant, but just kind of strange treatment as being different somehow. I think it might have been quite unconscious on their part. I know that one of the committees that considered tenure at Merrill had a student member. [He] reported that he had raised the issue at Merrill, and all the faculty said, "Oh, that's not an issue. We're not even going to talk about it. It's irrelevant." We would think it is relevant to be the first out professor, perhaps in the



United States, certainly at Santa Cruz, and that might be considered an asset. Certainly today, it probably would be under the idea of diversity, but in those days there was this kind of liberal ideology that one wouldn't consider any of those factors. The faculty's perspective was, well, we're not looking at that issue at all. Which we can now understand as homophobia, and the students understood as homophobia, but the faculty wouldn't. I understood it as homophobia at the time too. It's that subtle kind of discrimination; it wasn't anything overt or vicious, but it was a blindness, perhaps, to the value of other perspectives. In retrospect, or considering how things might be different now, I'm sure I would be much more integrated with the faculty so that, let's say, me and a partner might be going to dinner at their houses. There would be much more acceptance, so I think an out professor would have less difficulty now, but that might be naïve. I don't know, I'm not in that situation, I don't really know.

Espino: What kind of organizing happened around your case? What actual events took place?

Sable: The organizing was principally at two levels. Students tried to lobby to influence various committees. [At] both at the college level and at the board level, students tried to influence decisions, but they really got nowhere. Then they organized large demonstrations. I remember the first one was in that Cowell Courtyard and there were maybe several hundred people there. This was, I would say, in the fall of 1977, maybe October or November. It was organized by GALA and we gave speeches trying to explain what was happening.

Some of the [closeted] professors I knew were gay started to shun me in some ways, because I think they were afraid of outing, even though we didn't have that concept at the time, and even though it wasn't an impulse on my part, or the students' part. I think they were afraid, sort of instinctively, that to associate with me or us might out them. I remember two of them, in particular, at that first rally were hanging on the outskirts of the crowd listening to the speeches. One of them later became a very major figure at Santa Cruz in terms of pushing queer studies. I went up to him and said, "It's nice to see you here," (or something), and he said, "Oh, I want you to know I don't support you at



all. I think there's no place for homosexuality in the University." Probably the closest to homophobic statements I've ever heard from a faculty at Santa Cruz, was from that person, who later became a prominent leader of queer studies at Santa Cruz, so that's sort of an irony there. Another faculty at the same rally, who was hanging at the side, much less angrily and much less dismissively, actually fairly apologetically, mumbled, "Oh, I'm sorry I can't do anything to help." So there were very different attitudes, one more an attitude of rejection, the other an attitude of apology, or almost being ashamed of not being able to be a part of it.

We gradually had more and more rallies and moved them to Central Services, and at one point actually occupied the building for a weekend. The police were called in and organized to arrest everyone. The organizers decided just to evacuate the building rather than have the arrests and the confrontation. That was probably the high point of the pressure on the University. We did have a kind of continuing sit-in for a couple months at the chancellor's office, an un-obstructive sit-in in which the chancellor's wife provided cookies and things for us, which was very nice.

Also, some of the staff would hear the comments we'd make at rallies, because we had microphones, and a lot of the staff would come to us and were quite supportive. That's where I stumbled on this thing that there were other factors involved than just the University. One of the women who worked high in the chancellor's office came to me, and said she knew there were connections, that things were happening, pressure from high places. She was very afraid. I remember she was shaking, and said she felt she would lose her job. I promised I would never reveal who she was and so forth, and still am not doing that. An editor of the *City on a Hill Press* then said the Freedom of Information Act had just come out at the federal level, and sent a request for information on Santa Cruz, and most of the material he got back related to me and my case. That's why we thought that it involved some pressure from the government or something. At that time the Freedom of Information Act didn't provide very much information, so there're pages and pages of blocked-out stuff. They were required to send you what they had on you, but they could cover their sources. Reading between the block-outs, it was



clear that some faculty and apparently students in my classes were reporting what I was saying in lectures. This may not have only been about gayness, because I had visited China with a delegation from UCSC in 1972, and we had organized ongoing exchanges with China, so it might have been about that. I had been involved in the farm workers organization and the anti-war movement, so on all those levels there might have been interest from the government. I don't know what level of importance gayness had in the government's view.

The ethnic group that was most supportive was (which was somewhat surprising to me) the Chicanos, as they were called at that time. Mexican Americans somewhat had the stereotype of being homophobic, but in fact they were the most supportive. I'm speaking of the faculty. The fact that they were very loyal came out of my history of always having supported the farm workers. I was very touched by that. Katia Panas, who was the counselor at Merrill, had her office next door to me. Although she had a Greek background, she somehow identified very strongly as a Chicana, and with the farm workers movement. We were good friends, and she was very helpful in starting a new career as a therapist. Ralph Guzman was there. He was one of the founders of community studies, and he organized a lot of the first Chicano students there, or helped them connect community studies with their lives and with the farm workers' lives. He was very supportive. But I was disappointed that the other ethnic groups, and that other radical professors didn't take any interest in the case. They couldn't understand. I had several Marxist professors come up and say, "We don't understand how gayness is a Marxist issue," or, "Why is that a working-class issue? We know that the working class doesn't contain homosexuals." Ridiculous statements, that maybe are homophobic, but I've thought of them as more stupid than homophobic.

My greatest disappointment was the radical faculty's lack of support. My greatest gratification was how strongly the students, both straight and gay, supported my case. I remember at one point hugging the [Chancellor] before I was fired. He had made a speech on my behalf. I hugged him in front of a rally at the chancellor's office at Central Services, and thousands of students cheered. I think they saw it as a homosexual hug or



something, which it wasn't. I don't know if he was gay or not, I have no idea, but I didn't perceive him as gay. I was just hugging out of warmth and thanks for his support, but that felt good. It was the first time I had ever encountered a kind of public celebration of gayness. There was, again, enormous support from [students], but lack of support from the faculty. I don't know if they were trying to see things professionally, or trying to handle it as an academic question and not trying to see it politically and handle it as a question of sexual politics. I think that's the fundamental problem. Very few people were willing to take it on as an issue of sexual politics at that time.

I think the other issue at Santa Cruz is the debate around teaching versus research. If it hadn't been as publicly defined as gay, and more had been defined around teaching, it might have been interesting, because that was definitely a current there because of the reasons the students supported me. I was a very popular teacher and if that had a gay element to it... I don't know if it would have helped or hurt if I had been a straight teacher that people had supported. I know that some of my support from the students was they liked me very much as a teacher, and they sensed the University was even then having this dilemma of how much emphasis to give to their interest of having good teachers at Santa Cruz, rather than nationally recognized researchers. Some of it was around that. I think a lot of the students did support it because it was gay as well. But if I had been a bad teacher I don't think they would have supported [me] just out of gayness. I think a lot of students were very radical; they supported [me] because of that reason.

There were all these currents there, but they were all going in the same direction, so I can't really factor out the gayness from the other things. Definitely the students knew about the gayness and were enthusiastic. It might be interesting to talk to someone like John Laird, who was one of the very big leaders who would have a perspective of how important that factor was. Of course he's gone on to become a politician now, even at the state level. So he might see it politically, where I'm not a politician, so it's hard to see things, even looking back, in political terms.

Espino: What were the reasons that the committee stated for denying you tenure?



Sable: Well, one of the really frustrating things is that they never make it very clear. They just say that your work doesn't meet the level. You get a letter, which just says that [your] work doesn't meet what they consider requirements to have tenure at Santa Cruz. It wasn't clear to me. I was somehow more willing to accept that non-answer than the students who wanted something much more concrete and specific. What was clear though, in general, [was that] I was a very good teacher.

The question was if my research was adequate. I had published a book; I had several articles. I wasn't, certainly, a nationally famous sociologist, but from my judgment and from the judgment of other people, I seemed to be perfectly adequate and I still have that judgment. I know I have done work and could do work and would've continued to do work that was okay. But that seemed to be an issue, [although] it was never specified very clearly. When the students were told that, they wrote to some important people at other universities, some of whom wrote back very strong letters on my behalf, which were then published, or excerpts at least, in *City on a Hill*, praising my work, my research, my book, my written work.

The assessments made by these various committees, and by people they had sent my work out to be judged by, were all "confidential." It was for reasons of protecting my privacy, supposedly. The University wouldn't reveal what was in the file. So it was a very frustrating situation, where you couldn't find, essentially, the charges against you. I remember at one confrontation when the chancellor was speaking and I was speaking opposite him. Some student asked him, "Well, what's wrong with Alan's research?" or something. He said, "It would violate his privacy to reveal." I said, "I give you the right to violate my privacy. It's fine. I will publicly say it's okay." But he said, "You can't do that. We have to maintain it." So it was a strange Catch-22 all the time. You could never really be told essentially what the charges were against you. Just sort of through rumor and innuendo, it was something about my research being weak, but that doesn't feel credible to me, especially in the light of these extremely strong letters of support. At one point toward the end of all this, Michael Cowan, who was very supportive at Merrill, and later came out as a gay faculty person, was pressing for the University to appoint me



as a lecturer and not as a professor. Then the research wouldn't matter. I could just do the teaching part. But they said—"Oh no, they want both." So even on the notion [that they] could ignore the research, they still didn't want me there, even though I think it was unquestioned that I was one of the handful of really excellent teachers there.

If you had asked people at the time who were the five or ten best teachers, I would surely have been on those lists. Even if we just did it as a teaching post, the University didn't seem interested. That's what Michael was trying to do at that point, and I think that again shows that it wasn't about my work, because the teaching side of my work was unquestioned. Again, nothing was ever made clear, which is very unsatisfying. It's one of the strange cases of a very powerful force against you; but it's very vague and difficult to identify and point out. Most minority people have had those experiences. This, of course, was twenty-five years ago, before people were sophisticated about these issues, so it was very hard to argue around them.

There was one instance of homophobia. I had a very good TA, who was a Vietnam vet, a very masculine guy, who made a homophobic comment, I can't even remember what it was, at some point in the class. He had not yet known I had come out; it was just around the time that I had come out. I guess he hadn't heard about it. Then some students confronted him about it. He came to my office one day, and was so sweet and sheepish about his apology it was somehow even embarrassing for me to accept the apology. I said, "It's fine. I know how people have these ideas and theories." But he felt so bad. I was actually very touched by that. Once we both got through that incident, he was an extremely strong supporter, as I think he was all along. He just expressed a generalized homophobia and he felt very ashamed of having done that. I think one great advantage of coming out is it does inhibit those feelings in people, and cause them to question them. In general, the students, including the graduate students, were very supportive and not homophobic. They were definitely on the side against homophobia. So that was positive.

Espino: Can you tell me about gay/lesbian subject material that you taught in your own courses?



Sable: Around 1975, I started to introduce gay material. Some of it was actually, looking back, fairly radical for the time; like Jan Morris, who was James Morris, wrote a very good book, the first book I'd ever read anyway, about being a transsexual, and I assigned that book. It was very well-received in a *Sociology of Men* class where the primary focus was on gender issues. I still had that ideology of feminism, and so there were materials on women, on alternate gender identities, on alternate sexualities. We would read gay literature and personal accounts of gayness. There wasn't theory then, although there was an early book called *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* by Dennis Altman that I used, which was sort of a theoretical book. Another book I remember [was] *The Americanization of the Homosexual—The Homosexualization of America*. Those off the top of my head; so we did use materials that were theoretical and descriptive. I would have people come to large lecture classes, and sometimes had leather queens come, or drag queens, things like that, to give a sense of alternate sexualities.

I, in one class, introduced male porno, which was very interesting. The [campus] bookstore wouldn't order it so I just went to Polk Street and got a bunch of old porn [magazines] that they couldn't sell and they gave me for under ten or twenty dollars. I took a whole box of it. The first day of class I said that everyone should just take one at random, and then we'd have some reading assignment in it. The assignment was to look through the book and record your emotional reactions. That was one of the most interesting assignments I had ever done. Looking back, there were very interesting responses. At that time, the very popular view among women was that porno was very oppressive to women, and some of the women who were most committed to that perspective were very surprised that male porno didn't seem threatening to them. Male porno didn't seem directed against them, so they found it much more acceptable. So that was very interesting to them, and to me.

Some of the straight men had interesting responses too; seeing men having sex with each other was not as threatening to them as they thought it would be. Looking at it and studying their reaction helped them to process it with a lot less fear. And again, I did not get homophobic responses to homosexual material, which surprised me. In fact people



were quite interested. I think partly it was cool or interesting; it was sort of an edge kind of thing to do and students like that. But also it was folded into other things.

One of the most wonderful things about sexuality [is that] the boundaries aren't always that clear, so you didn't get that us-versus-you kind of lecturing from professors or students. Within this, it seemed more permeable, especially again with women, because at that time it was a sister movement to feminism, so there were a lot of things moving back and forth. A lot of straight men also appreciated some of what we were saying about gay men. They could identify as straight men... In fact, sometimes they would object to our claiming for gay men certain qualities, like sensitivity or humor or artistic ability. Some of the more sensitive, humorous, artistic straight men would make very valid objections to that kind of claim. I remember one guy who had very long hair, who was a musician, and was a very sensitive man, spoke very powerfully and really moved me and the class over a few notches when he said, "Well, that's the kind of man I am," and he really was. That was unquestionably the kind of man he was; he was a musician, a very sensitive, straight man. The straight men were often very good at challenging our more nationalistic claims. So that material was very useful to everyone, but again it was more around issues of gender and expression, than around a kind of gay nationalist perspective, although sometime it was presented that way. But it quickly dissolved because of the students' actual affinity to it, whether it's straight women or straight men. Of course we didn't have queer theory at the time, so it was a kind of natural queer theory, if you will, an organic understanding of that.

I was very surprised when you sent me the clippings from the *City on a Hill* of my analysis at the time. I had been thinking about the interview, and what I had thought I thought was something new. But it was very close to what I had been thinking thirty years ago. I was very surprised. You could say I hadn't learned much in thirty years, or the issues are the same. Even though there are now out gay faculty, and there's a queer studies program, and it would appear structurally or institutionally, that things are much further along in terms of the actual understandings people have of themselves or



of each other, I don't think there is that much progress. But I don't know. I'm not there and you have to be there to feel that.

Espino: Is there anything you'd like to add or have people know? Now that you have the perspective of twenty-five years, looking back, what do you think about your tenure case? Here you were, the first out professor, and denied tenure. Now we have queer studies and all this research being done, people teaching queer theories in classes. What do you think about that? Do you think that your decision to come out allowed for some of this to happen in the University, and how does it feel to have helped some of that along, but at the same time been dislocated from it?

Sable: I'm sort of ambivalent, as I am about the general gay movement now. I don't know how much my case helped Santa Cruz move along. I know Nancy Shaw's case came up a couple of years later, but she had a huge fight also. By no means did the University community look at what happened to me and say, oh my God, that's horrible, so we won't be homophobic anymore. She had to go through the same thing I did, but she won, partly because she went to the law, which I didn't.

Maybe I should say something about that. The ACLU was going to take up my case, but they estimated it would take six years for it to work through, and I just didn't want my life to be on hold for six years. I very much wanted to get engaged in the gay world in San Francisco, so that's why I moved out of academics, and into being a gay therapist. I was one of the first gay therapists in San Francisco, or in the United States, really. I turned my back on academia. I know my case didn't free Santa Cruz, because Nancy [Stoller] went through the same thing a couple years later. I think it may have moved some people, so she might have had more support than I did, and also other things were happening in those years. I don't really know when the mood in Santa Cruz changed. I now know that at some point in Santa Cruz there were gay partners living in provost residences together, and there's queer studies. So at some point it has shifted.

I'll go back a bit, just to try to interpret what my case might have done. As I said, I don't think, given that Nancy's case [happened] a few years later, and she had the same



struggle essentially, I don't think my case really moved the Santa Cruz community as a whole, or the UCSC community as a whole very much. But I do know that my case helped organize gay organizations. It helped a lot of people individually and so it was valuable in that sense. Nancy may have had more to build on than I did. Of course she used a legal strategy, which I had decided not to use. It took her a long time to win. I don't know the details.

I didn't have much contact with Santa Cruz, so I don't know the details of how queer studies got started, but I think that what's happened is there's a kind of acceptance. It's a kind of assimilationist thing, as strange as this may sound to queer studies people. Being extremely academic and arcane in some ways in their approach to things [hasn't been] threatening to straight people, because it's another academic specialty; it doesn't have much social/emotional consequence.

I think that one of the threatening things about me and the people around me in our generation, was we saw ourselves as trying for a new kind of society, and new kinds of relationships. I don't see the queer theory people doing that. Their theories are revolutionary, but it is theory, where we were more interested in practice, in a certain sense. So it's much less threatening, and it can be incorporated in a university. I think clearly Santa Cruz is much freer than it was twenty-five to thirty years ago, but I see that as a general increasing in power of gay people everywhere. Now as we've come out, we have been more accepted in certain ways, but some of the cost of it is I think we can't really question certain things that we did at that time.

So I'm ambivalent. I'm happy that provosts are living with their partners in provost houses, [that] there's queer theory, and that people are more open to homosexuality or other kinds of sexualities. One of the things we were most fighting for was that people would feel free, and these people still don't feel free. One of the reasons I left academics, was maybe I sensed that there wasn't a place for me because I'm the other kind of queer person, if you will, or gay person, that wants us to be fully accepted as we are.



I think there's been a great deal of assimilation and compromise. Even, in let's say, the Castro [district in San Francisco] which is a base of gay life, there're still many more people who voted for Gore and Clinton than who voted for Nader, even though Gore and Clinton had a very strong record of homophobia when they had power, and Nader was offering a much more feminist, much more pro-gay platform. Most people didn't care about that. They were assimilated enough to vote for what I see as fairly homophobic, compromised candidates.

During the time of [my tenure] case that I was at the University, even before it came up as a case, gayness and gay issues were related intimately to other issues: to feminist issues, to issues of ethnic minorities, especially to gender issues, and to general issues of freedom. Freedom is discourse and freedom of empowerment of different people. I think, strangely, as gayness has become somewhat accepted, it's become narrow; it's become another ethnic group or something. It's found a little niche that it can exist in. The ties it could have, and the meanings it might have to humanity or people in general, are lost. I think the movement in general, and maybe specifically at Santa Cruz, although I don't have any direct observations of Santa Cruz, has just become another sort of pressure group or ethnic group that identifies inwardly and wants its share, but doesn't reach out in very important and interesting ways to other groups about more fundamental issues, like freedom and power and love.

Those were very central issues we talked about—freedom, power, love—in talking about gayness, and that drew in a lot of the students, certainly, and I think frightened a lot of the faculty and administrators. I think the reason for my marginalization is my discourse wasn't in the center of academic discourse. It was off to the side. It was more humane, more political, more poetic, more personal, and that made it hard to evaluate and assess, and also strangely subversive. I didn't create this by myself: I read books; I had friends; I talked to students who were involved. It was a collective impulse which I think we've lost in the gay community. I think gay academics or queer academics haven't carried that meaning. They now have a very arcane academic interpretation of things, which dehumanizes what we were trying to do. I think it will be revived. It's been wonderful to



meet you and feel a kind of soulful *simpatico* with you, [Michelle]. I know you're not the only person, like you know I'm not the only person, so this perspective still exists, but somehow it's not given voice, strangely. That's very sad to me. I meet it all the time in younger people in my practice, and just bumping into people here and there. It's not the dominant voice anymore in the gay community, or lesbian community, or any of the queer communities. But it is the voice of the people within it; that's still how people feel. We know each other and we're that kind of people, but our leadership in what we articulated about ourselves isn't about that anymore. And that's regretful.