

Professor Bonnie Zimmerman  
Vice-President for Faculty Affairs  
September 7, 2010  
interviewed by Susan Resnik  
for San Diego State University  
125:51 minutes of recording

SUSAN RESNIK: Today is Tuesday, September 7, 2010. This Susan Resnik. I'm with Professor Bonnie Zimmerman in the offices of Special Collections and University Archives at San Diego State University. We're going to conduct an oral history interview. This project is funded by the John and Jane Adams Grant for the Humanities.

Professor Zimmerman retired this year from San Diego State University after a notable career in a variety of roles, beginning in 1978. From 2003 until this year, she was associate vice-president and led Faculty Affairs, having previously served as the chair of the university senate. She began as a lecturer in women's studies in 1978, and became an associate professor of women's studies from 1980 through '83. In 1983 she became a professor. She taught courses, chaired theses, contributed to the syllabus, served as the chair of women's studies from 1986 to 1992, and again from 1995 to 1997. For more than thirty years, through her research, teaching, and program development, she has fostered the growth of women and lesbian studies. She's been an active member of the Modern Language Association and the National Women's Studies Association, of which she served as president in 1998 and 1999. She has published extensively, including her books, *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*; *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; *Professions of Desire*; *Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*; and *the Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969 to 1989*.

Her many articles include, “A Lesbian Feminist Journey through Queer Nation, and the Challenge of Conflicting Communities,” “To Be Jewish and Lesbian and a Literary Critic.” She’s also written numerous reviews. Her outstanding contributions have been recognized by her receiving awards, grants, and honors, including Most Influential Faculty Awards in English and Comparative Literature in 1982, and in Women’s Studies in 1985, 1990, and 1999. The Alumni Association Distinguished Faculty Award in 2004, Selection for Lambda Archives San Diego in 2007, and the Emily Toth Award for *The Safe Sea of Women* in 1991.

It is really a pleasure to be here with you Professor Zimmerman, and I would like to begin by asking you about your early years. Where were you born and when?

PROFESSOR BONNIE ZIMMERMAN: Thank you, Susan. I was born in 1947. I was one of those Baby Boom, classic, right-after-the-war babies. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and I grew up in Chicago in the suburbs, and lived there all of my life, pretty much, except for when I went away to school, until I moved to San Diego in ’78. I come from a very strongly connected and loving Jewish family, very close to my parents, very close to my siblings and all of their children, cousins, the whole thing. Our family history, I think, is just the classic history of the immigrant family coming from Europe at the beginning of the century, moving through from the working class into the middle class, from the west side of Chicago to the north side of Chicago to the suburbs of Chicago—just a very basic, classic, uncontroversial kind of childhood. That’s pretty much who I was.

SR: Do you have any remembrances of school in those early years, or things that interested you in particular?

BZ: Well, yes, I was a smart child. I was sort of one of those little child prodigies. I was quick at learning to read, and was always one of the best students in the class, and all of that. I think one of my strongest memories of childhood is that I had very, very, *very* bad asthma as a child, and it was the kind of asthma that was triggered by emotion, and so my social development was not the best. And I think for me reading was an escape, as I think it is for many academics. I was not a happy child, and I was not a happy adolescent, but I do have good memories of being very involved in activities. I was in theater and plays, I was in musicals. I began to study music when I was around ten or thirteen or something in there. And that was another outlet for me. So between music and academics, those were the things that kept me going through what I really have to say was not probably a very happy—certainly not a carefree childhood. And that, I think, is also an important influence in that my sense of it is that most highly-achieving especially women of my generation, were unhappy as kids. They didn't belong. Because if you successfully belonged, then you were really easily channeled into a very conventional life. And if you didn't, then you had to find your way elsewhere. And if you did it in a positive way, you ended up making a career, or becoming *something*. And I think that was certainly the case for me.

SR: And you were living in suburbia. Did you gravitate towards the big city?

BZ: Oh absolutely. I hated the suburbs. We moved to the suburbs when I was eleven, and it was ironic, because we moved because that was the thing you did for the

kids so that they would grow up better and they would have better schools. Well, I was in an honors program in the Chicago public schools, so I would have been just fine if we had stayed in Chicago. And I moved into a social environment I could not handle, I just wasn't very good at it. However, we also moved to—the suburb was the very, very first suburb north. I mean, we were on the border with Chicago, and there was public transportation, there was Chicago public transportation, and I used to go downtown every weekend, go to the library, the public library, or to neighborhood libraries. I started taking voice lessons in high school, and I would go downtown after school on Friday and go to the American Conservatory of Music for voice lessons, all by myself. It was just the high point of my week. So the city, the big city, was my territory; and the suburbs I felt were like exile.

SR: So when you were pre-college, how did you decide where you wanted to go, what you were looking for? How did that happen?

BZ: Well, the first thing is that I wanted to go to the University of Chicago, and my father said no. He said I could not go to the University of Chicago because I would become a beatnik, so he wouldn't let me go. Well, I ended up somewhat—this was a little past beatnik period—but I ended up a hippie, so it really didn't matter one way or another. I was torn between academics and music. And by the time I was applying for colleges, I had decided I wanted to be a music major. So I only applied to two schools, Indiana University and Northwestern. And Indiana was my absolute first choice and Northwestern was just a backup. And as it happened, I got one of those early offers with a big scholarship, and so there

never was any question. The interesting thing that I pondered at times is that it never occurred to me to apply to one of the top-rank small colleges, like an Ivy League, and I just thought that was not possible, we couldn't afford it. And it *never* occurred to me that I might have been able to get scholarships, so I never did. And sometimes I think that would have been interesting. But you know life is filled with those little paths not taken. And I always thought that I'd want to end up teaching at one of those small liberal arts colleges in a small college town—never happened. And as a matter of fact, Indiana was a wonderful place to go to school, and it was, as for so many, I think, unhappy kids in high school, college was the place I bloomed. It provided me all of the developmental opportunities that I needed, and I had a great time in college. And I loved Indiana. Bloomington, Indiana, is one of the most beautiful places in the country, and the campus was gorgeous. And I only stayed a music major for one semester, but I got an excellent education [unclear].

SR: So when you changed from being a music major, what was that about, what did you do?

BZ: Well, it was about two things: First of all it was about a recognition that I didn't have a physical ability to be a professional singer. The asthma was too problematic. I also discovered that while I really had a very lovely voice, the quality of the voice is the least of the things that you need for a professional career, and I didn't have a good ear. So between really not being able to master the breathing, and not having an absolutely first-rate ear, it just wasn't going to happen. So that was part of it. But the other part of it was that I came with so

many A.P. credits from high school, and I'd started in a summer program so I had credits from the summer, that in my very first semester.... Indiana University's music program was like a conservatory, it's not like many music programs are now. I had done almost *all* of my academic credits by my first semester freshman. And I would have been doing nothing except music. And I kind of got to know the music majors that first semester, and I just thought they were so narrow, and that wasn't me. I decided I would keep singing, but I didn't want to major in music, so I switched over to—I went back and forth between philosophy and history. I ultimately ended up with a philosophy major.

SR: Were you involved in any social clubs?

BZ: Not social clubs, no. I got involved a *little* bit on the fringes of the New Left as an undergraduate. My best friend, her boyfriend was one of the leaders of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], and so I was part of the SDS circle, not very actively. I didn't really have politics at that time, it was more of a social thing. It was, as was not uncommon in the sixties, before the women's liberation movement, even smart young women like me pretty much did what their boyfriends did. My boyfriend at the time was a writer, and was also on the fringes, so he was more of kind of a hippie. So between him and my best friend and her boyfriend, that was sort of my social circle. So it did radicalize me, and it did set the stage for what would be the shape of my career. But it was drug, sex, and rock 'n' roll—what can I say?

SR: Yeah. So paving the way to graduate school, did you think of *not* going to graduate school, or did you assume you would go to graduate school? How did that happen?

BZ: I always probably in the back of my mind assumed that this was the direction that I was going to go in. I wanted to be a college professor even when I was in high school. That's what I thought I was going to be. And when I gave up the music career, it was obvious, what else do you do with a philosophy degree, except get an advanced degree and move on? But as I said, I got involved in the sort of hippie Left movement, and I decided to take a year out and follow my boyfriend when I graduated. He was finishing his master's degree, I finished my bachelor's degree. We decided to go to New York. And so I spent a year in New York, which was a very interesting year. It was a very *hard* year. It was a very formative year.

SR: This was in the sixties?

BZ: It was 1968-69.

SR: I remember it well in New York. I lived there then.

BZ: Yes! It's interesting, because I think we thought we would go to San Francisco, which of course was the summer of love and all of that stuff, around that period of time. But we ended up going east. That was the year I call my hippie housewife year, because basically I was being a housewife while he was writing the great American novel. I mean, it's *so* classic. But it was also during that year that I became aware of the women's movement. At first I was very critical of it, very negative. I had read an article in *New York* magazine, which you may remember

(SR: Very well.), which totally trashed the movement. And my best friend, the one that I had mentioned before, had moved to Boston with *her* boyfriend. And she got involved with Cell 16, which is one of the early radical feminist groups, classic—a great group. So she sort of got involved a little bit with them and told me about the women's movement. And I wrote her a letter, which I think I have a copy of, and to my great shame later on, told her that she really had to be careful, and that if she got involved in this movement that it would ruin her relationship. Eventually they did break up, as of course I did as well. But that didn't take very long. It did not take very long for me to begin to understand what was going on, because I'm a very self-reflective person. I'm always thinking about and aware of things. Plus, things weren't going the way I thought I wanted them. I thought I wanted to get married, and all of that. Thank God he didn't! I appreciate that so much now. And thank God I didn't get pregnant, because those were the pre-abortion days. And my life would have been absolutely totally different if those things had happened. So I feel like there's a lot of accident as well as purpose in my history.

And I was also hedging my bets, because during that year I started preparing for the GREs and applying for graduate schools. And you have to do that—I mean, we moved to New York in June, and in September I was beginning to get prepared *in case* it didn't work out. And I have often pondered the thought that I applied for eight graduate schools, I did not apply for a single graduate school in New York City. I did not apply to Columbia, I did not apply to NYU. So I must have known that this was not my future. And as it happened, I picked

Buffalo. Actually, I went to Buffalo, they gave me a great deal, but several other universities gave me a full ride as well. But I went there because one of my professors from Indiana had gone to Buffalo, and I wanted to go study with him. So that's why I went. And then he left. But I was there.

SR: Right. Well, that's how these things happen.

BZ: Absolutely, that's how these things happen.

SR: That's very interesting, yeah. And so while you were in New York—it interests me because I lived in New York for most of my life until recently—the year 1968, there was a lot going on.

BZ: I don't think I knew any of it. I was not aware. I think I must have known, like for example I read that article in *New York* magazine, so I was reading the media, but I remember.... Well, we spent the year going to the museums. Oh, I went to the opera and the ballet all the time, standing room, cheap. Walked the streets of New York, every neighborhood.

SR: Where did you live?

BZ: We lived on East 12<sup>th</sup> Street—they were beginning to call it East Village at that time—in a rat-infested apartment, railroad apartment.

SR: If I'm not mistaken, that's where Kathy Boudine's [phonetic] house was, on East 12<sup>th</sup>, I think.

BZ: We were between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>.

SR: Oh, I'm sorry, hers was West, you're right. Okay, East. Right, right, right.

BZ: This was 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Our neighbors across the street were a recovering heroin addict and his girlfriend who was very much like me, a nice little middle-class

girl. They had a baby. They were very lovely people. He was kind of weird, but... I learned a lot about heroin addiction from him, and how it worked.

So anyway, the end of the year, I went off to graduate school, and tried to maintain the relationship for a couple of months after that, a little bit after that, but we were ready to move on in different directions.

SR: All right, so let's go to graduate school. Tell me about what it was like going to graduate school in Buffalo.

BZ: Well, Buffalo had this reputation as the Berkeley of the East, and not, I think, for the quality, although the quality of the school was pretty good, but because of the radical politics that were going on. That's not why I picked it, but it certainly had an impact. So let me think now, the summer in between my year in New York and starting graduate school, I went back to Chicago for a brief time, and I started going to some meetings of a women's group. And that was my first sort of taste of the women's liberation movement and the consciousness-raising groups. So I knew that when I got to graduate school I wanted to find a C.R. group. So I started graduate school and in the very first week I searched out a C.R. group and became part of it. It was a group of primarily graduate students, and it was very, very academic; it was very intellectual; and it was very left wing. It was a very Marxist leaning C.R. group, because of the people who were sort of leading it. And I'll give you an example. When you read about the C.R. groups like in New York—Red Stockings and all of that—you read about women talking about when they talk about family they're talking about their relationships with their mother and all of that. *Our* C.R. group, if we talked about the family, we were reading

Engels, *On the Origin of Family, Private Property, and State* and analyzing whether or not he had the primary contradiction right. Because that's who we were. We were mostly intellectuals. But it radicalized me. It totally changed my whole perspective on everything, on what I wanted to do academically, what my life was going to be, what my dreams and my goals were, and slowly and eventually what my sexuality was. So it was a tremendously important part of my life.

At the same time, the academic world, the courses I was taking, they weren't all that stimulating. I only had a couple of professors that I really liked all that much. Buffalo had built up their English department, and had hired some *big, big names*: Leslie Fiedler.... I'm trying to remember some of the other people who were there. Honestly I'm blanking on them. I do remember Fiedler because I do remember sitting in, trying to decide whether to take a seminar from him, and sitting in on one class and totally hating it. So I never did that. Robert Kreeley [phonetic] was another one who was there, but I wasn't a creative writer, so that didn't matter.

In any case, the academic part of it just wasn't all that important to me. *But*, the political part.... And then there was also a social group of graduate students who were heavily into drugs, all that kind of cool stuff that we were all doing those days. So that was sort of the mind-blowing expansive thing. I had a group of my cohort in graduate school, mostly guys, just one other woman, and we were really close together. But it was the women's liberation part of it that really became the dominant factor in my life. Because we were graduate students,

we decided that our activism would be to teach a class, to create a women's studies class. Now that was what was going on all over the country, including at San Diego State. There had been one or two classes earlier than '69, but it really was 1969 that was the explosion. There was a term that somebody coined, called the mushroom effect. And that was referring to the way consciousness-raising groups were popping up all over the country. So there was the same kind of mushroom effect at colleges with women's studies popping up all over the country. So we began to meet, to plan a course. And that course was offered for the first time in the spring of 1970. No, I think I'm wrong about that, I think the spring of '70 was when we finalized the course, and it was offered for the first time in the fall, which was my second year. So within one year I was teaching women's studies. And we created it, there was nothing. I mean, there was Engels *Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State*, that was one of the textbooks. And then there were people who were writing articles: Meredith Tax [phonetic] and Juliet Mitchell, and Schulamette Firestone [phonetic]. They started with articles, and then those articles became books, and that created the literature of the women's liberation movement, and that literature became the basis of really what we were doing in women's studies.

And so I had, in a sense, two parallel academic experiences going on. One, ostensibly I was a graduate student in English—and they didn't see much of me. And then the other was, I was teaching women's studies. I was doing a women's studies course as a kind of an overload, because it wasn't institutionalized the way it was at San Diego State. *And* I was also taking

whatever English class I was assigned as my T.A. course, and turning it into a women's literature class. So in my three years of graduate school, I taught introduction to women's studies, I taught women's literature, I taught women's autobiography and biography. I taught feminist theory. These are all courses I created.

SR: That's fantastic.

BZ: Now I didn't teach the lesbian studies class.

SR: That's my next question.

BZ: Somebody else was doing that. Madeline Davis, who subsequently co-authored a book with Liz Kennedy, who was also at Buffalo during that time. Liz Kennedy was an assistant professor, and all the rest of us were graduate students, so we were the group. I don't think anybody else, other than Liz and me, from that group really went on to be academics. Partly, in my graduate entering class there were forty students who started—I don't think more than two or three of us ended up with academic careers. It was the seventies. The seventies were a *horrible* time. There was recession, there were no jobs. So I was doing women's studies and the women's movement, and I was doing my degree. I was always—there is a part of me that is very conventional. I knew that I had to finish my degree if I was going to have any chance of having a career, and being able to support myself. And I grew up with the belief that you absolutely have to support yourself. I mean, I never had this idea that it didn't matter what I did, that I could just go off and drift around, and everything would come my way, because even though we were middle class, we were not easy middle class. My father had

business turnarounds and things that made.... I grew up with the sense that people had to work for a living, so I knew I had to do that, so I knew I *had* to get my degree. So at the same time that I was [advocating], “Tear down the patriarchy!” and “Tear down the university!” and “Revolution!” I was making sure that I met every milestone in terms of getting my degree: taking my orals, and doing my perspective, and then ultimately writing my dissertation. And I did write the dissertation, and I did get the degree.

SR: What was your dissertation about?

BZ: My dissertation was on George Eliot. It was a feminist analysis of her novels. It was one of the first feminist literary dissertations, and I published quite a bit out of it. I mean, it wasn't a very good thesis, but it served me very well. And I used all of my political research and knowledge and applied it to George Eliot's novels, and it worked very well, because she was such a social novelist. I was never very interested in artistic issues, I was always more interested in *what* they were saying than *how* they were saying it. And I managed to finish in four years.

SR: Wow.

BZ: Yeah, got out in four years. And the last year or so, you know, the women's movement was crazy. I was thinking about this because tomorrow night I'm going to speak in a women's studies class, graduate class, and they're reading one of my articles, and so I was thinking about this article and what I was saying in it, and how dogmatic and vicious the women's movement has *always* been—all liberation movements. I mean, the same thing could be said about ethnic studies and ethnic liberation movements, and *all* social movements. People just.... It's

always about “I’m right, you’re wrong,” and then killing each other over it. We didn’t literally kill each other, but we hurt each other really badly. I hurt people, and I got *really* hurt by people. And so my time in Buffalo was very mixed. I got very, very badly trashed within women’s studies, because it was bourgeois to write the dissertation. I withdrew from women’s studies. For one year I withdrew just to focus on my dissertation, and they all felt betrayed. Well, you know, what could I do? I needed a degree. I felt I had to have that degree. So I left Buffalo. I did not leave happy, or happily. I sort of left with my tail between my legs, and I got out of Buffalo and went back to Chicago.

SR: Did you go to live in the suburbs with your family, or live on your own?

BZ: I went back and I lived with them for a couple months while I was looking around for work, and getting enough money to be on my own. The one privilege, I think—well, I’ve had *many*, many privileges in my life. I don’t come from a privileged background, but I had the privilege of an intact family with a house. And there have been other times.... There was a period of some years where, thank goodness, I could go back and stay with my folks for a while. I couldn’t get a job, there were no jobs. But I went back to Chicago for five years and had a fabulous time, actually, and accomplished so much. It was a great, great period in my life. But it had to come to an end because it just wasn’t possible to continue to live so on the edge. It was possible to do that in the seventies in a way that is just sort of a genteel poverty. Poverty today is poverty. I don’t think there is a genteel poverty. In the seventies, especially if you were not responsible for

children, you could really live on very, very little, and I did, for all that period of time.

So the other big thing that was happening during that period, of course, was coming out as a lesbian. And that's been *so* crucial to my career—not to mention my personal life—but also to my career, because although I have made *something* of an impact through what I wrote on George Eliot, that's not what anybody knows of me. A few people do. Occasionally I get an e-mail from somebody saying, "I *so* liked that article you wrote on Daniel Deronda," or "that piece you did on Felix Holt." Yeah, right, okay, but that is *not* what people know about my career. So it's really been through the growth of the development of lesbian studies.

SR: And so how did you go from there toward San Diego? How many years were there in between?

BZ: I left Buffalo in 1973, and I started in 1978, so it took me five years. I've told other people, "Don't give up for at least five years. It can take that long to get the right job." And I supported myself during that time with part-time work, part-time teaching, part-time secretarial work. And I was very involved in the lesbian feminist movement community—not really a movement anymore—the community in Chicago. I got connected back to music and sang again. I traveled for a year in Europe, and when I came back I applied for jobs, and this was the only one that came up. And I'm glad it did, because it was the right one. *And* it was a temporary job. It was a one-year temporary with the *possibility* of being

converted into a tenure track. And I moved to San Diego on the chance that maybe I'd stay, and maybe I wouldn't.

SR: Had you ever been out in the West before?

BZ: No, and I never wanted to. No, I'm sorry, that's not true. I had come out in, I think it was around 1975, to visit some friends. A whole bunch of people from Buffalo, that I had known in Buffalo, had moved to San Diego. And I came out, I think the Modern Language Association was at San Francisco that year, so I went to the MLA and then I visited people in San Diego. I never wanted to move to California. I was not like all of my friends who everybody was trying to get to California. In fact, I had moved to Boston. I was on my way to moving to Boston. I'd packed up my car, I was visiting people in Maine with the intention of settling in Boston and just trying to support myself as best I could, when the phone call came about coming to San Diego for an interview. And they said they had a hard time tracking me down, because I was on the road. I was peripatetic. I came out for the interview, and no question about it, I was going to take a job.

SR: Big change, to come west!

BZ: It was, but it took me at *least* ten years, maybe fifteen years, to adjust to being in southern California. I was not a southern California person. I was an Eastern, Midwestern, big city girl, and I didn't like San Diego, didn't like it for a *very* long time.

SR: I imagine it's changed a lot since.

BZ: It has changed tremendously. It's more of a city now. But *I've* changed. And the primary thing that I've changed about is I no longer want to be cold. That has absolutely been a key change for me. I don't even like *San Diego* winters.

SR: Yeah. That's good, in particular. Okay. Tell me more about when did you begin in lesbian studies?

BZ: Okay. Well, just like my work in women's studies grew out of my involvement in the women's movement, for me politics and academics have always been sort of intertwined, so doing work on lesbian studies was a natural outgrowth of my coming out as a lesbian, which was part of the whole women's liberation experience for me. Many people have written about that historical period, the late sixties early seventies, and the whole gay-straight thing, and the women coming out as part of the women's movement. So I don't think I'll talk very much about that, except to say that I was kind of like the classic—it was just the classic experience for me. I really cannot say whether, when, or if I would have been a lesbian without the women's liberation movement. Obviously I had been heterosexually involved when I was in college, but there were also like little flags that I can look back to, that suggest that I *could* have gone either way, even when I was younger, if events had kind of conspired in that direction. I don't know that that makes me different than the vast majority of women. I think, frankly, most women could go either way, depending on how their lives work. Some women, I'm sure, feel they absolutely could only be lesbian, or they absolutely could *only* be heterosexual, but I think for most women if you're really honest about looking back at your life.... I mean, my deepest, deepest crush in school was my sixth-

grade teacher, and I know that I had some sexual feelings about one of my roommates in college. There were other things like that. But it was the sixties. It was the fifties and it was the sixties, and the only lesbian that I knew when I was growing up was actually my father had a business partner when we were *very* young, and she was a drag butch. And there was no way that I could see myself in her. So for me, a lesbian was a cross-dressing woman, for a long time. So the women's movement introduced me first to there were lesbians in the movement, and then there were—again, I'm such an intellectual—there were writings about this, and I was able to begin to put some of my feelings into a context and create a kind of reality for me. And the consequence was that somewhere in 1971, '72, I realized this was the direction I was going in. Was it a choice? I don't know. See, I believe that everything we do in life is a choice. I think there are elements of choice in everything, and maybe there are also elements of kind of pushing yourself in certain directions circumstances push you, whether they're internal, whether they're external, but ultimately you make choices. I don't know why it's become such a bad thing to say that you choose to act on your sexual feelings one way or another. So at some point I knew that this was where I was going. I wasn't interested in men anymore, I was interested in women. Maybe I had always been, but hadn't allowed myself, and maybe it was freshly new—I don't know. But that was it, and that's where I've been forever, and I've been very, very happy, satisfied, delighted, that circumstances moved me in that direction. So to be a lesbian in the early seventies was to be—I've written, I think, about this—to be part of this kind of brand new world. “Oh brave new world, with such

creatures in it!” And it was political, and it was cultural, and it was social and emotional and sexual—everything going on at the same time.

I didn’t start doing real academic lesbian work initially, partly because us new lesbians.... Buffalo had a very large and well-defined, working-class, lesbian subculture. If you read Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis’ book, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, it’s about the Buffalo history.

SR: Great title!

BZ: Well, you would enjoy it, because it’s oral history, it’s based on oral histories. Liz is an anthropologist. It had one of the most highly-developed bar cultures, working-class lesbian bar culture. Us new university lesbians felt a little bit we weren’t entitled to be saying anything about what lesbians were—*they* were the lesbians. So Buffalo had one of the most highly-integrated lesbian communities, with the old pre-feminist and post-feminist lesbians really integrated. A lot of relationships developed across the groups and all of that. So it was Madeline who came out of that culture, who developed and taught the first lesbian course at Buffalo. So I never felt really entitled to do that.

I also didn’t really start doing lesbian critical work until I finished my dissertation. I think I wrote in one of my articles that.... I tried to introduce a little bit of kind of what we might call today queer theory approach, to some of George Eliot’s writings. But it wasn’t until, really, after I’d finished my dissertation, which really focused on more gender than on sexuality, that I was able to do a little bit of work in that way. And then when I got the job at San Diego, that enabled me to become a lesbian theorist, because it was so open here,

and there were no rules, and nobody was.... It wasn't UCSD where you would have to follow a certain path of publication. I felt totally free here. Other lesbian academics of my generation were losing their jobs. I was being given research grants to further my lesbian work. And that's something that.... San Diego State was the very, very best place that I could have ended up. And it was just fabulous that that's what happened.

SR: Prior to meeting with you, I just went downstairs to see the exhibit of women's studies, it being the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I see you contributed a quilt and some of the things.

BZ: Yes, that was a quilt that came out of one of my graduate seminars, yes. I gave it to the university.

SR: I found it fascinating that San Diego State had the first women's studies program in the country, because I thought of San Diego at the time as....

BZ: Conservative.

SR: Yes!

BZ: Well, it *was* conservative. San Diego was conservative, but the university was not. The university was very radical. It was a very open place. I have some theories about this. If you look at the history of the development of women's studies across the country, the places that women's studies grew earliest and strongest were the second- and third-tier universities, not the elite universities. Now there were a few exceptions: University of Michigan....

SR: Smith?

BZ: No, I don't think Smith had a real early one. University of Michigan had an early program, and it's clearly one of the top research universities. But Berkeley, Harvard, Yale, the seven sister schools—maybe not so much the seven sisters—but certainly the Research 1 universities, their women's studies programs developed a little bit later. They jumped on the bandwagon. I think that it was at the universities where there wasn't—especially where faculty didn't have as much of the prestige factor, where there wasn't as much of this “you have to publish according to the rules” attitude, that women's studies really flourished. Then it spread everywhere, obviously. So I think when I think about where women's studies was, it was here, it was at San Francisco State, it was at Wichita State, it was at Towsun State. It was at the state universities, not so much at the Research 1s.

San Diego State also had—I think this is really important—they had, even before women's studies, they had developed Mexican-American studies. At other universities there were early African-American studies, black studies, and there was a black studies program that started about the same time. But Mexican-American studies, I think it started in 1968. It was *really* early. And so it kind of—I think it already created a sort of a model for identity studies, so I think that was helpful as well. But for whatever reason, it could just be the particular conglomeration of people at the time, women's studies took hold really quickly. And I don't think I need to talk about the founding of women's studies. I wasn't here, so I can't really talk about it, except that we in Buffalo were very close to the women in San Diego. We felt that we were similar institutions.

SR: Yeah. I just noticed that it started in, what, 1969? Carol Roll [phonetic] connected with Joyce Knauer [phonetic]?

BZ: Yes, but there were others as well. Carol and Joyce have their own perspective on history.

SR: And they organized rap sessions. I got that from the Star book.

BZ: Yeah. And they were both very influential and important. There were others as well. There were a lot of others as well. And like everywhere else, just like in Buffalo, it was the students who started it. I think what was different was that in Buffalo we only had this one faculty person, Liz, and she was a *new* assistant professor. And our women's studies developed outside the university. They had something called billboard courses. You could just create a course, put it on a billboard, and students showed up, you taught the class. At San Diego, there was a group of women faculty who got involved from the very beginning, and they turned their courses over to become women's studies classes, so women's studies developed within the institution here, whereas most other places it developed on the outside and then eventually moved in. San Diego State started from the inside.

SR: Interesting.

BZ: So it was easy to get it institutionalized. So it started with the first classes, like in 1969. By spring of '70, it was in May 1970 that the senate approved a program in women's studies. So that's why we're the first program. I mean, the classes were elsewhere at the same time, but they were a little bit outside.

SR: That's very, very interesting in terms of the organization and the institutionalization of it. That's fascinating.

BZ: Yeah. And there are male professors, very established male professors, who are so proud of their support of women's studies as far back as 1970. So it somehow never really was.... Now I'm not saying that then there was not a fight that had to be made. And I'm not the one, again, to speak about that.

SR: Star referred to it briefly.

BZ: Yeah. And I remember having to fight for—we fought to get our courses into the general education program. There were individuals who I will not name, who fought against it, saying that these courses were not part of the core of the university. And some of them have changed their opinion later, and apologized.

SR: That's even better!

BZ: Oh, they didn't apologize, but they acknowledged that, "Eh, maybe I was wrong."

SR: Yeah. Something about, "is it indoctrination or education?"

BZ: Exactly. Right. A little bit of both.

SR: And in Star's book, he speaks of the resistance of a professor who said that, "the hand that rocks the cradle should not rock the boat." So....

BZ: Well, but that was so minor, compared to the general support. The other thing is, the administration was always supportive of women's studies. And I've always felt in my career that the administration was more supportive of my work than a lot of my colleagues were. So I've never had an anti-administration attitude, because I just thought the administration here was fabulous. And that was true back in 1970, and it was true in 1974 when the program was re-started because it

had fallen apart because of politics. And it was pretty much true all the way through. I've always been very pleased with the support that administrators have given to social change.

SR: That's terrific. At the beginning, the creation of women's studies, it mentions that there was a seven-part program, and they had a storefront community center.

BZ: That is all overblown, and I would rather not talk about that piece of it, because I was never involved in that aspect of it. By the time I came, women's studies was Women's Studies.

SR: Okay. So you came in 1978.

BZ: Yeah. Would you like me to tell my story?

SR: Yes.

BZ: Okay, I will tell you the story of how I was hired at San Diego State. Well, first of all—and I only learned this subsequent—I was not on the short list to be interviewed. My friend, Pat Huckell [phonetic], who should be interviewed, and I will mention that she's got stories that would really be very helpful, very interesting—my friend Pat and a wonderful professor named Lois Kessler [phonetic], who died last year, and was one of the faculty associates at the time—she was in health sciences—and she was one of the original faculty who turned her class over to become a women's studies class back in '70. Pat and Lois were not on the hiring committee, but they told me that they weren't satisfied with the choices that they saw for the final list, so they went back through the pile of applications and they pulled mine out. And I am convinced that one of the reasons why they noticed mine was because one of the things that I listed on my

c.v. was that I had worked on *Lavender Woman* in Chicago. I didn't say anything about what *Lavender Woman* was, but anybody with any insight would know that that was a lesbian newspaper. And I think that that was a strong reason why they thought that I should get interviewed. So somehow they convinced the hiring committee to put me on the short list. And so I ended up getting interviewed. And I came here.

As I said, I'd been traveling, I had nothing with me. So I went to Filene's Basement in Boston and I found a three-piece, navy blue, skirt suit—skirt, jacket, and vest—for twenty dollars. I still remember how much it cost. I had not worn a skirt since maybe 1970, except for when I had to be a bridesmaid at my sister's wedding and my sister-in-law's wedding. And I haven't worn, by the way, a skirt since. So I came in the navy blue three-piece skirt suit, and I did a really good interview. And at the dinner at the end of the day, they had a lot of students who came to the dinner, and there were like twenty-five people at the dinner, and we went to a Chinese restaurant. Two things happened at this dinner. The first is that the students were talking about how much they wanted a course on lesbians, and I said, "Oh, I could do that!" The second thing that happened is that twenty-five people sitting around a great big round table, at a Chinese restaurant, half an hour of, "Well, should we order this, or should we order that? Or should we order *this*, or should we order *that*?" And I said, "I'll order for us," and I ordered the whole dinner. I got the job offer. Well actually, the fact is, they offered it to somebody else who turned it down. I was the second person to get the job offer, and I took it. And I think partly it was because while they weren't going to say that they

wanted a lesbian, they really wanted a lesbian. They were getting a lot of pressure from the students, because the entire faculty was heterosexual, and there had never been a lesbian. And I think they also thought that I'd become a good department chair someday because I could order (SR: Order Chinese food!) for twenty-five people!

SR: I think that's a good indicator!

BZ: So I got the job. And I do have this to say about that navy blue suit: Almost ten years later—I was still the only lesbian—we were recruiting for a position, and we brought in a candidate who we thought might be a lesbian, but who was very, very cagey and very closeted. She showed up wearing a three-piece navy blue suit with a skirt, and we joke still—she's one of my best friends now—and of course has never been in anything but jeans since—and we joke that there was one three-piece navy blue skirt suit circulating around academic lesbians, sort of like the “Sisterhood of the Traveling Skirt Suit.”

SR: That's marvelous.

BZ: Yeah. So that's my hiring story. And it was great. It was just great being here. And the first year I developed a lesbian studies class.

SR: Terrific. I noticed also in 1978, I saw your picture in *The Follies*.

BZ: Oh yes!

SR: Tell me about that.

BZ: Well, every year there was a big end-of-the-year, or maybe it was end-of-the-semester party. Back in those days, the students and the faculty were much closer. First of all, there was less difference in age between us, and it was just

more of a community at the time. And I think also maybe we were really not very good about boundaries. I've become much, much stricter about boundaries since the seventies. So we would always do these big parties. And one of the things that was kind of a constant was the Feminist Follies. And the faculty all kind of did skits. So they all decided that they were going to dress up like housewives, so you see people are in bathrobes and all that stuff. And I said "Well, I'm not. I'm a dyke. I'm not gonna do that." So I decided to dress as some kind of lesbian stereotype. So that's why I'm in the athletic clothes with the tennis racket. And my piece, what I did was I read a poem by Pat Parker called "For the Straight Woman Who Wants to be My Friend but Doesn't Know How To." And it's just a whole thing about first you must always.... How does it go? "First you must never forget that I am a lesbian. Second, you must always never remember that I am a lesbian," or something like that. And it was a great poem, which is why I was wearing the costume—which is ironic, because I am totally not athletic.

SR: I wondered about that.

BZ: I didn't have anything else to wear.

SR: I noticed that, and I was thinking, oh, because there's another part of the exhibit that's all about the sports....

BZ: No, it had nothing to do with that. It was just something that I was thinking of something that would be kind of lesbian. So I had a great time being the lesbian for a long time.

SR: Yeah. Well, tell me about what it was like in the early eighties here at the university.

BZ: Well, okay, starting '78 through those first few years. Well, it was (sigh)....

SR: It was the Ronald Reagan era.

BZ: Oh, that didn't matter.

SR: It didn't?

BZ: No. That had no impact. I just remember.... I was first a lecturer and then an untenured—I mean, I was an untenured faculty member for the first few years.

SR: Okay, so you weren't dealing with the budget issues at that time.

BZ: I didn't deal with any of that at all. I knew nothing about that. My world was women's studies. I had a little bit of—occasionally I was on a few committees—but my world was women's studies. And it was the faculty, it was the students. I mean, it was this network. And then I was very involved in the community with lesbian organizations and all that.

SR: Tell me about that a little bit.

BZ: It was the same as in Buffalo. It was the same as in Chicago. We had an organization called San Diego Lesbian Organization, SDLO. I was involved with SDLO. There were newspapers, I wrote for the local San Diego newspapers. You know, we went out to the bars. I was having relationships. I was young. I had a job. I was very involved also with NWSA, and MLA, the women's and lesbian caucuses of MLA. So I was going to conferences. I have letters. One of these days I have to put my letters in order. I was corresponding with academics—lesbian and feminist academics all over the country, in the days before e-mail when we wrote letters.

SR: That's wonderful to have them.

BZ: Yeah. I don't write letters anymore. So it was just a heady time. It was exciting. I was writing some of the best stuff, stuff that was creating waves. My first articles, the articles that got me the job, were my George Eliot articles, and I wrote several, about four or so, articles, right in a row, and I got tenure. That's how I got tenure. But then I started writing lesbian articles, and I wrote one article, I gave it as a paper in 1979 at NWSA and then got published by, I think, 1981, in *Feminist Studies*, called "'What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism.'" And it was this overview of all this lesbian feminist criticism that had been coming out since the late seventies. And it was encyclopedic and synthesizing, which is kind of like what my style is, my mark on the profession really. It became *the* article, and it still *is*. I am in the *Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*. How many people are in the *Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*?!

SR: That's terrific.

BZ: You know, I am right after Oscar Wilde! I mean, it's unbelievable. And it was that article. That article has been reprinted and reprinted, almost.... I mean, there are times I've told people, "No, you may not reprint it in that book, because that book doesn't have anything to do with this. You just want a token lesbian piece, and this is not the right one. Do your homework and find the right one." So that made a tremendous impact. I wrote a piece on teaching lesbian studies courses. I wrote a lot of things that were the first ones. And so I made my career really, really quickly. I mean, by 1981, 1982, I was one of the top lesbian scholars or critics, so people know me.

SR: Right. In other words, you were able to go to different conferences?

BZ: Yeah. Oh yeah. Well, we got \$500 a year towards conference expenses, and it's still, I think, \$500 a year, thirty years later. Yeah, that was never an issue. I went to two, three, four conferences a year. And I got lots of support from the university. I mean, I got release time, I got grants, I got pretty much whatever I needed.

SR: So it doesn't sound like there was a struggle or anything. It was a *good* thing.

BZ: For me, my career was a dream career. I had no trouble at the university at all. This place nurtured me, I had no trouble getting promoted, I had no trouble getting tenure.

SR: And they also clearly recognized the wonderful work that you were doing. You were getting awards and honors all along.

BZ: Yes. I think I was recognized as one of the outstanding scholars at the university.

BZ: Right. And it continued. That's marvelous.

BZ: Yeah. I have also—I *always* got elected to anything that I wanted, committees and things like that. I can't say enough about this place, about the administration and about most of the faculty. And even the ones that I've struggled with and fought with, for the most part I felt that they've treated me like a—they see me as a peer, as somebody they respect.

SR: That's very, very good. That's where we are. What else was happening in the eighties?

BZ: Well, in addition to the academic work in teaching lesbian studies, we were also beginning to develop some gay and lesbian presence on the campus. Now my

memory of dates is very fuzzy on this one, so I'm going to have a hard time, but sometime in the eighties—and I think it must have been mid to late—I honestly cannot remember—the gay and lesbian faculty and staff began to get together. It started first with social stuff. We had a little salon that met once a month or something like that. People would just get together. It was primarily mostly the men, and I think it was for them mostly a kind of social club. There weren't as many.... There weren't that many out lesbians initially, although that switched, interestingly. And most of us knew each other already, through women's studies. So we started with that, and then we began to have a little bit of a political focus. We created something we called GLIC, Gay and Lesbian Issues Committee. Terrible name, terrible acronym, but it's what we used. And we would meet for lunch periodically and try to do things. The climate in the eighties was not real open. It was open within women's studies and academically. It's not like there were very many other open gay people on campus.

I should say.... Let me tell you.... This is going back a little bit, but I just want to acknowledge two anecdotes that demonstrate kind of the contradictory nature of being gay or lesbian at that time.

The first is when I came for my interview in 1978. I was interviewed by the associate dean of the college, who was Elsie Adam. And Elsie had actually been involved with women's studies. She had edited an anthology some years before, but she was the associate dean at the time. And I walked into her office and there was a poster on the wall advertising gay and lesbian literature, a course that had been offered already. And I thought, "Ah-ha! the associate dean's office

advertising gay and lesbian literature! I could be happy here!” And as it happened, that course had been taught as a special topics course by a professor in the English department named Karl Keller [phonetic]. So Karl really has the honor of having taught the first gay course. Now, Karl’s focus was much, much more on men, but still. And he was just a wonderful guy. He was funny, flamboyant, outrageously gay. He was a former Mormon who had come out in adulthood, and all of that. So Karl was sort of the first openly gay person, and was very, very open about it.

But then on the other hand, the other anecdote I will tell you—and I will not say the name, because I don’t want to embarrass her—but the first week that I was on campus—this was after I’d been hired and I came the fall of ’78—somebody came to my door, a faculty member who was in her second year in another department of the college, came in to introduce herself. She had been involved with women’s studies, so she came to introduce herself. She closed the door and she said, (in a whisper), “*I’m a lesbian too.*” Now, these days, we’re best friends, and I remind her of this sometimes, and she laughs about it, because of course now we’re *all* so open. But, you know, there really was in the seventies, “Is this going to ruin my career?” I mean, Karl was a full professor. This person was an untenured assistant professor, so it still was a very, very tentative time. So during the eighties we were trying to change that climate, in part by the work we were doing as academics; but also, I remember.... And I think this was in the early nineties, I’m jumping ahead a little bit. We developed resolutions that I

introduced into the senate on support for domestic partners, and to get the ROTC off of campus because of the gay military.

SR: I read about that, yeah.

BZ: So those were the kinds of things that we were doing, and we were just trying to create more of an open environment. And eventually.... And then a little bit later in the nineties, my colleague, Edith Benkoff [phonetic], who now actually has my position, the one that I just retired from, Edie and I began to work on creating gay and lesbian studies courses. I was still teaching lesbian studies, lesbian courses, in women's studies and in English. But we created the first gay and lesbian course in the mid nineties, and eventually created enough courses—we started the work towards putting together a minor which now exists. So it was nice. I mean, I started the work back in the eighties and nineties, and then we kept picking, and other people have picked up, and now there's a minor. And I hear they're talking about now a major, which is fabulous.

SR: That's wonderful.

BZ: Yeah. So that was all really good stuff, really good stuff. I never felt the least bit stifled as a lesbian on this campus—not on this campus. And I'll give you an example. This is my Tom Day story. I came the same year as President Day, and he was an interesting character. His politics were diametrically opposite to mine—not just politically, but socially, culturally. He wouldn't let condoms on campus, and things like that. Okay. But I always thought that he had the best interests of the university at heart, and I really felt that he was developing this university—he and others—to make a really.... His values were the same values

that I had about the importance of research and scholarship and quality. Well, I don't remember the year—I wish I could remember the year, and it would be easy enough to track it down—it was the year that Lynn Chaney was the head of the NEH. She set a policy that would deny any grants to gay or lesbian research. I think that this was precipitated by something that had happened with the NEA, and with some grants that the conservatives called into question. So it was around sometime probably in the early nineties. Well, the university invited, same year, Lynn Chaney to be the commencement speaker. I was furious! I wrote Tom Day a letter and I said, “I feel that this is a slap in my face as a member of this community, that if I applied for a grant I would not be allowed to have a grant. How can we bring somebody in who has these policies? This is like saying I'm not a part of this San Diego State community.” Tom wrote me a three-page, single-spaced letter back. He disagreed with me, he explained his reasons why, but he took three pages to explain what his position, his beliefs, were about this; didn't dismiss me; took me seriously; and I have *always* respected him. I respected him before, but I respected him, and I have stood up for him after the tough times in 1992. This must have been in the eighties, it was well before that.

SR: That's very interesting.

BZ: Well, he had the ability to disagree fiercely, and say *exactly* what he thought about something, without being dismissive of another person's thoughts. So I just felt respected. That's what it was, I just felt he showed respect. So that's my Tom Day story.

SR: That's a good story.

BZ: The early eighties through my book.

SR: Okay. Tell me more about what you were thinking and writing in the early eighties and onward.

BZ: Okay. I think that what I was most interested in as a scholar was trying to map the dimensions of this field of lesbian literary theory. I mean, I was pretty much focused on literature. If you look at my work, it is pretty much this synthesizing and organizing type. I really believed that we were creating a cultural movement, a community of writers, scholars, activists, that this was something unique and wonderful that was happening. And I also was somewhat, I think, deluded that we all thought the same. And I think that was one of the dilemmas or one of the problems that my generation of lesbian feminists had, that there was a certain, “This is who we are, and we *know* who we are, and we’re all the same, and there is no dissension.” All of that began to disintegrate in the 1980s, as it had to, because it just wasn’t true, wasn’t real. I mean, everybody has a tendency to project *their* reality as the only reality. You have to constantly be aware of what you’re doing, and fighting against that. Initially we weren’t so good at that. So as I’m writing, I would write things and then I would get kind of gently criticized sometimes, and sometimes not so gently confronted, and it was hard. It was a lot of growing pains through the eighties. But I’m very proud of the work I did. I wrote some really fine articles, and they were published in a lot of really good places. I made lots and lots of good academic colleagues. They became friends and all of that.

And then I began to decide that it was time to write a book. I had thought that I would be writing a book on George Eliot, but by the mid eighties, that seemed so long ago and far away. And so what I decided I wanted to do was write a book about all this fiction that was being written in the late seventies, and mostly in the eighties. It was seventies and eighties. I saw it as representative of this community. And it took a very long time. I began the book, I actually began working on the book just prior to my first sabbatical. I had a sabbatical in 1985-86, for that academic year, and I had been collecting all these books and I'd been reading them, and I'd been taking notes on them. So I had notebooks full of reading notes. And my partner and I decided that we wanted to spend my sabbatical year in Europe, and that we wanted to get a van, a camper. And so we bought a Volkswagen van and picked it up in Europe, and we spent almost a year—I think it was a little short of a year—traveling around Europe, camping for most of the time, except for the winter we spent two months in Portugal. And during that period of time, I kind of wrote the first draft, a very, very, very rough draft of my book. Mostly it was commentary on my notes. So what I did was I had another notebook—and I still have all these notebooks, and I don't know what to do with them. I should probably give them to an archive or something.

SR: Uh-huh, it sounds like they should maybe come here.

BZ: Maybe they should, maybe they should go to the Lesbian Her-story Archives. I'm not sure about this yet. So I had my reading notes on all these books, and then I did interpretive writing on them. And then when we came back at the end of the sabbatical, then I actually started working on the book. So it began 1984-

85, with the research. It wasn't published until 1990, and I actually stopped writing it. It went into production very, very quickly, so I stopped writing it around 1989. I mean, I included books up through '89. Well, one of the things that happened was that the theoretical landscape changed during that period, and I didn't keep up with it. I began to be aware of it, when I was already well into writing the first draft of my book. You begin to see the influence of it in the later chapters of the book. I began to incorporate some of the post-structuralist theory that had already kind of rooted itself in literary criticism. By 1990, when the book was actually published, people like Judith Butler [phonetic] had—I think *Gender Trouble* was published in 1989—and everybody was doing LaCon [phonetic] and Fukow [phonetic], and I hadn't really kept up with that. So the reaction to my book was kind of interesting. It was a little bifurcated. On the one hand, a lot of regular readers read this book. People who read the novels, read the book, and they loved it. Some of the writers wrote me and said, "I didn't realize what I was doing until I read what you said about my work, and now I see how it fits in." That's some of the best stuff you could ever have anybody say.

SR: That's wonderful.

BZ: On the other hand, the academic theorists—and by now women's studies and even lesbian studies is kind of really institutionalized into the literary critical world—they really were very critical of the book. The very first review that came out, the first review of my book, was in *The Nation*. Oh my God! I mean, who gets reviewed in *The Nation*?! And it was partly positive, (whispers) *but there was so much that was negative*. And it was all because I wasn't writing in the

discourse. *And*, although I had thought that it was clear that what I was talking about was the vision of a generation, and then how that vision had kind of become a myth—because I read a lot about the myth of the community. But this reviewer—and it set the tone for a lot of other reviews—because I also am upfront about placing myself as part of that—I mean, I was *in* that community—didn't see that I was being self-critical. They just saw that I was trying to *be* a myth-maker, rather than to explore myth-making. And I was also using concepts that I think are more congenial, frankly, to anthropology, the whole notion of myth, and cultural myths, rather than discourse and narrative.

SR: That's what interests me, yeah.

BZ: So my book was not as well received as I would have liked. And when you've spent six years of your life, and this is to be your crowning achievement....

SR: That's hard.

BZ: It was a little hard. So I had very mixed feelings. And that, I must say, began my beginning of a little bit of a retreat from academia. But it doesn't really show up for ten years or so, because during the nineties I continued to write. But I was primarily writing reflective pieces. I no longer felt that I had anything new and original to say, because the discourse had just gone in a different direction for me, and it was not something I was interested in. It would be like if right now, at age sixty-three, I tried to teach myself a new language. I would never be fluent in it. I felt at that point, by 1990, post-structuralists and post-structuralist language was a foreign language I could not be fluent in. And queer theory just wasn't where I was, either politically or personally. And I just don't believe that theories are

right or wrong. I don't think theories have a reality to them. I think that they are expressions of the zeitgeist. Well, lesbian feminism was the expression of *my* zeitgeist. I couldn't make myself a different person, didn't *want* to make myself a different person. Queer theory never resonated for me. Yeeeah, a little bit, here and there, but always kind of as queer theory as a second language kind of approach. So I was kind of like a little bit on the outside. I still got lots of invitations to come and speak. I still got lots of people asking me to write things about women's studies, about lesbian studies, about all of that. I did a lot of that. But I don't feel that after *Safe Sea of Women* I don't feel like I produced anything that was new. I was primarily shaping some things from the past—which has a purpose. *And*, I began to write reflective essays about my own career and my own life.

SR: And your vision, and your own way of looking.... Well, that's what I was interested in you sharing, if you wish, more about that article about being Jewish, a literary critic....

BZ: Yeah. I wrote three what one might call autobiographical essays. And that was one of them. Why did I write that? Well, it was an invitation, an invitation to contribute an article to this book, people of the book, which was going to be a collection of essays by Jewish intellectuals. And once again, it always amazes me when I am considered to be in the same club as other people. It's like, "Are you sure you're talking to the right Bonnie Zimmerman?" You know, this thing about, "*I'm* in the *Norton Anthology*?!" or "*I* got reviewed in *The Nation*?!" And *I* am there with...." I mean, there are some other people in this collection that it's

like, “Are you serious?! You want *me*?!” Okay. So I definitely want to do it, and I thought it would be a very interesting way of reflecting upon myself as a Jew, which I had never done. And I write that in the book, that it was, I think, 1995 or 1996, that’s when the book came out, and in my whole academic career, twenty-five years, I had never written a single thing about being Jewish. I even point out that in *The Safe Sea of Women*—it’s right in the article—at the beginning, in the introduction, I say something about, “This is my place in the universe. I’m white, I’m middle class, I’m a feminist, I’m a blah, blah, blah, but I’m not a Jew.” At the very end, at the *very* end of the book, I do the same thing, but now I’m Jewish. And I say metaphorically, “From the beginning of my journey to the end of my journey, I became a Jew.” So I reflect upon that. And it’s because of the deep conflicts, because this is highly personal, it’s hard for me to talk about, especially because it’s connected, it’s my family. It’s the only part of my life and my identity, my academic life, that implicates my family. I grew up in a secular Jewish family, and in order to be who *I* was, I had to reject who *they* were, and some of that rejection was rejection of that commonplace, middle class, Jewish, out-of-the-ghetto-into-the-suburb kind of growing more and more conservative. I mean, a really formative experience for me in my high school days was fighting with my family about the civil rights movement, and that the everyday ordinary racism of middle-class Jews was so appalling to me—still is. And so shaping myself in reaction to my family meant not denying my Jewishness, but simply minimizing it. Then I went to Indiana University, where there were no Jews. I think out of a campus of 30,000 students, there were about 300 Jews in the sixties.

And I encountered anti-Semitism, and then I got into the Left, and the Left was anti-Semitic. They called it anti-Zionist. They called it anti-Israel. But it really was very easy to mistake for anti-Semitism. It made me uncomfortable, but I was also very.... This was part of the rejection of the family as well, because, I mean, for years I couldn't have a conversation with my father about *anything*. And for years, even after we resolved that, I avoided any conversation about Israel. I'm still a little iffy. I don't always....

And then also, during my college days—actually I think this was more when I came back to Chicago—my brother became Orthodox, my younger brother. So then there was Orthodoxy in the family. So it was all kind of a mishmash of things that I didn't want to deal with, so I just didn't think about it, and I didn't write about it. And yet at the same time, I am intensely Jewish. I'm Jewish in my physical looks—nobody's going to doubt that I'm Jewish. I'm Jewish in my mannerisms. I have a Jewish personality, Jewish character, and I love the history of Jews. I am *deeply* Jewish. And I have become more Jewish over the years.

Well, so this article is about coming to terms with all of that. How can you be a feminist and a lesbian? I had such issues with my family over that. Mostly they were *my* issues, but they were real. I mean, my mother could not handle it. My mother used to say, "Okay, so you're a lesbian. So what will it matter to me, because I'm gonna kill myself."

SR: Oh, that's like a "Seinfeld"!

BZ: The Jewish mother suicide! I mean, it, really! But it was what they teach them in “Jewish mother school”!

SR: I understand.

BZ: I know you do, because every Jewish woman understands this.

SR: I do, I do.

BZ: But coming to think about all of this....

SR: Jewish mother school, I love it!

BZ: Absolutely. That turned out to be one of my most satisfying articles that I wrote, and one of my favorites.

SR: That’s good.

BZ: Now the interesting thing about it is that about half of it is very personal, and about half of it is an analysis of a novel. And I really think that the analysis of the novel was a way of not getting too deeply into my personal stuff.

SR: Yeah, I get that.

BZ: And I ended with an anecdote. The other thing is, it was a different style of writing for me. It was, I think, the first time that I incorporated anecdotal personal stuff into an academic piece. So it was really nice, developing a new style of writing. And one of the nice things about it is that I gave this article to my brother and sister-in-law to read, because after my book was published was when I came out to my whole family. My sister knew, I had told my mother and father. I had not told my brother. I hadn’t told some of my other relatives. So in preparation for the book being published.... I mean for years I’m telling them I’m working on a book. “What’s your book?” “Oh, it’s feminist literature.”

That's a whole other issue. So I told my brother, and he said, "Well, you know, yeah, it's against the laws. I might have a harder time if you were a male, because it's so explicitly forbidden. It's not quite clear with women. Besides, you know, whether you're a lesbian and you don't keep the Sabbath, kind of the same, you know." Anyway, we really have become so close.

SR: Oh, that's wonderful.

BZ: And I end the article with an anecdote that my brother tells me about how one day my brother and sister-in-law are in a bookstore and they decide to look for my book. And they look, find my book, and they start reading my book, and they laugh about what people must think to see the two frummies with *The Safe Sea of Women*. And to me that was the reconciliation. And it was not a false reconciliation, because one of the things that I talk about in that article is that it's easy to gloss over contradictions by saying, "Well, I'm going to redefine Judaism." Well that's not so easy. And I guess there's a part of me that if I were deeply religious, I think I'd be Orthodox, because I'm kind of like a true believer in some ways. I've never been able to just say, "It doesn't really matter." It *does* matter. But what matters is you have to learn how to live with contradictions, not to get rid of contradictions, but to live with them. So it's a good article.

SR: I'm going to read it. It sounds really good, and I look forward to it.

BZ: Yeah. It's an interesting one, because it's kind of melancholy throughout, but then there's a sort of a positive feeling at the end. And by now, I'm so close to my family, I'm so connected with them all, my father and my brother flew out

here for my retirement party, surprised me. It's just everybody accepts my....  
It's just such a change in the culture.

SR: That's so great. How wonderful to have that.

BZ: Yeah. I sometimes say.... It really began to change when my partner and I  
bought a house, and my mother and my father thought, "Oh thank God, she's  
normal, she's gonna settle down."

SR: You have a house!

BZ: "All right, so it's with a woman, but at least.... So they won't have children,  
which is a good thing because it's a mixed marriage." But anyway.... So....

SR: Got it. Oh my.

BZ: As I said, so I wrote these reflective pieces, I wrote something about reflecting  
back on that whole period of adamant belief, when you just—and how cruel we  
were to each other back in the seventies. We were very cruel to each other. And  
then this piece that I wrote about being a lesbian, and my lesbian journey. Those  
were very, very satisfying things to write. And I did a couple of other  
anthologies, collections of articles, which is also something that I found to be a  
very satisfying experience, is becoming an editor. I moved, really, from being a  
writer—I didn't write so much after the mid nineties—but I edited three books  
during that period. And that was a whole other.... That, I guess, goes back to the  
Chinese restaurant story, that ability to gather the needs and put it together in a  
satisfying meal.

So the *New Lesbian Studies* and *Professions of Desire*.... *Professions of  
Desire* was really interesting because it was the first thing I'd ever done in

collaboration with a man. And it was a wonderful experience, became very close friends with George; and then culminating with the encyclopedia, which is really, when you think about it, an *encyclopedia*?! You put together an *encyclopedia*?!

Yes I did!

SR: That's terrific. That's great.

BZ: That was another incredible experience, and one that took four or five years. That was the focus of my work.

SR: Yeah, it *is* wonderful when you reflect back at what you do. Step by step you can do these things. And that's a whole wonderful thing.

BZ: Yes. And then it was very satisfying to say, "And now I'm done." I'm done.

I've done everything that I want to do. I've written every article I want to write. I do not wish to write anymore.

SR: While you were doing this kind of writing, and it was the nineties and into 2000, you changed your role, or your role changed at San Diego State University, because you got involved in heading up—you went into administration.

BZ: That was not until 2000. The nineties was really a period of—between the mid eighties and through the nineties was really my research and writing period. I did *some* administration, because I was chairing the department. But that was not really—that's not.... I never stopped writing during the years that I was chairing the department. And I got *much* more involved in university governance. I did get involved in university governance.

SR: Which is what I recall reading, right.

BZ: I was on committees. And then I started serving in the senate in 1997. But I didn't do very much in the senate until '99. So I was much more involved in the National Women's Studies Association. That was the major focus of my sort of service work. And I was a major player in the NWSA, up through around 2000.

SR: Okay.

BZ: But definitely I had a pretty strong sense that the encyclopedia was going to be my last piece of work, and I think that was published in 2001—I don't remember. I knew that I had squeezed every last drop of lesbian feminist anything out of me. There was nothing new. Even the last couple of articles that I wrote that got published in the 2000s, a couple of pieces in anthologies, like the one I'm going to speak about tomorrow on women's studies, the history of women's studies. Even there I felt that I was repeating myself—I was very close to repeating myself. And I had seen too many academics do that, and I didn't want to do it. So it was really clear to me that I was either going to have to break some new territory and go into a new research direction—and I hadn't the vaguest idea what that could be—or I was going to have to do something else. And I thought that the something else was going to be more governance service.

I assumed I would continue teaching, although I was beginning to also burn out a little bit with teaching. So the senate stuff became a good outlet for me.

SR: Tell us more about the senate.

BZ: Well, I had been briefly in the senate, actually only for a semester, *way* in the past. But then I just was never interested in that. I had been on committees,

university-wide committees, but I wasn't really interested in it. But then, I don't know, somebody coerced me into putting my name up for nomination, because they were always desperate. I mean, nobody wanted to be in the senate. So finally, it was more like, "Oh, God, I *owe* the university this," or probably more likely, "I owe So-and-So." I think I know who it was. And so I agreed to be in the senate. And I'd say those first two years I don't think I really participated all that much. I rarely spoke. I mean, I'd listen to these people, and they know Roberts Rules of Order and parliamentary procedure, and they've got everything. Anything that goes on, they've got something to say. I don't have anything to say about it. What do I care about this issue or that issue?! I really was not.... And in fact, I *have* looked back at the minutes of the meetings, and I rarely said anything. I was not very active.

But then my friend Pat Huckell, became chair of the senate in 1998. And Pat was convinced that I was the future, and she was going to *make* me be the future. She decided that I was going to succeed her, because she didn't see anybody else. I mean, it was one of those times where the old guard was beginning to drop out, and it was not clear who the new people were going to be. So Pat wanted me to be the next senate chair, and in order to do that she created a committee for me, a task force for me. It was on off-campus centers. And it was a hot topic then, and it periodically keeps coming up. This was back when it looked like San Diego State was going to expand exponentially forever, and where were we going to go, we didn't have any room here, so where were we going to go? And one of the theories was, one of the proposals was, to create off-

campus centers, like little mini-universities. So the senate created a task force to look into this, and Pat made me the chair of it. Well, what that meant was that we did reports, and I got up in front of the senate and made reports. So I got visibility. That's how we did it. And she began to mentor me. She began to show me how she would do everything. And lo and behold, 2001, they nominated me for senate chair. There's no election for chair. I mean, you only put one person up. I became the senate chair, and it was two extremely ... shall we say dynamic years. There were a lot of fireworks during my senate term. I guess there always are, but actually there weren't. The two years I had were two *really* difficult years, there was stuff going on—not stuff that I really want to talk about. But there was stuff going on, and I learned a lot. And I was challenged in ways that I had.... I mean, I developed skills I didn't know I had, but I built them. I think I was a good senate chair. I don't think I was one of the great senate chairs. I mean the nineties was really the period of *really* great senate chairs, including Pat. And I don't think there have been senate chairs like Pat or Gene Lamkey [phonetic] or Ray Balee [phonetic]. But then everybody looks back. You know, it's the Golden Age thing—"oh yeah, it *used* to be better." But I would not put myself in that same category. But I was a good chair, and being a senate chair, it's a faculty role. The concept behind the senate is one of shared governance, which is the sharing of governance between the faculty and the administration. And the senate chair is "the faculty," so you're the head of the faculty. I'll tell you the very first thing that I had to do as senate chair: 9-11. The first senate meeting was scheduled for 9-11.

SR: Oh! That's momentous!

BZ: So immediately, what do we do? Move the meeting. Do we have a resolution? What should the resolution say? As senate chair I organized the memorial or whatever we did. So there was all this stuff. So that was like the very first thing. And there were things all the way through those two years that there was a lot of turmoil.

So anyway, I got a very high profile, and I also learned a lot about how the university.... You get a different view. When you're a faculty member—and I've said this many times—when you are a faculty member, you primarily see the university and experience the university through your department. When you become a department chair, then you experience the university through your college. You begin to see, “Oh! my department is not the *only* department.” Everybody has needs, everybody has a perspective. It's only when you go and do senate stuff that you begin to see the university as a university. And being the senate chair, you get to do that in conjunction with the top administration. You meet regularly with the provost. You meet regularly with the president. You meet with the vice-presidents of various divisions. And you just get that whole sense of the university.

And I knew, as many senate chairs have had the same experience, once you are the chair of the senate it's really hard to step back and just be a faculty member again. So I figured that my next step had to be administration, because what was I going to do? I wasn't chair of the department anymore, and I wasn't going to be chair of the department. I was the graduate advisor, and I got a lot of

satisfaction out of running the graduate program. But what was I going to do? And I wasn't going to do research anymore, because I couldn't think of anything I *wanted* to research. And I remember a very interesting conversation that I had with Nancy Marlin [phonetic], Provost Marlin, and I said, "I'm interested in administration."

Let me step back, because I do have another anecdote. Okay, so here's an anecdote. (sigh) Let's see, it would have been 1996 or 1997. Steve Webber was newly president. The academic vice-president had retired. Ethan Singer was the acting associate vice-president. This was before Nancy came. Ethan called me into his office. I did not know Ethan at all. And he said that we had a new president, the president was looking for people to get involved, and Ethan thought that I would be a good person to have in academic affairs, would I like to come and work for him? And I said, "Absolutely not. I am not the least bit interested in administration. I wouldn't be an administrator! Over my dead body!" All of that. And so I turned him down. And I think that it was the right thing to do at that time, because I don't think I was ready. And I don't know that I would have been good at it. I think I would have failed, and that I would have never gone on. So fast forward about five years....

SR: It was the time to do it.

BZ: It was the time. And I had a conversation with Nancy about it, and I said, "I think I'm interested in administration, and like maybe being a dean." And she said, "You'd be a very good dean, but two things: first, you have to pay attention to how your face is showing your emotions. I can read your face, I know exactly

what you're thinking all the time. And as an administrator you have to have a blank face. Secondly, you have to move. If you want to go into administration, you have to be willing to move, because you're not going to—there's no ladder within the university." I wasn't willing to move. We were happy here, I wanted to be in San Diego, so I thought, "All right, it's not going to happen." And then in the fall of 2002, late summer/fall of 2002, two jobs came available, were announced. One was dean of the College of Arts and Letters, and the other was associate vice-president for Faculty Affairs. I really was interested in being the dean of the college, but I knew that it was not going to happen, that they would be looking outside, because you want fresh people to come in. And I also knew that there were some things that I didn't have: I didn't have budget experience, I didn't have development experience. I was smart, I read the situation, and as senate chair I actually attended the first meeting of the search committee when the president said, "We're looking for somebody from outside the university." So okay, I knew. So I decided to apply for the Faculty Affairs. Actually, somebody pushed me into it, but I had been thinking about it. And I hadn't really thought about it, but it turned out that I was exactly the right person for it. I had exactly the right combination of experiences and skills and actually the right temperament. And so I got it!

SR: Terrific!

BZ: I was scared. I mean, there were things, I was dealing with collective bargaining, grievances, disciplinary actions, lawyers. I'd never done any of that! I had to go out and buy clothes!

SR: But you could order the Chinese food!

BZ: I could order the Chinese food, I was good at that.

SR: Absolutely!

BZ: But seriously, the biggest deal is that I had to get a professional wardrobe, because even....

SR: But you didn't have to have skirts.

BZ: Not skirts, no. No, no, we were long past skirts. And those seven years in the position, I'm just really pleased that I had that experience.

SR: Oh, it's terrific.

BZ: It was a wonderful.... I loved my job. I won't say that I loved every minute of it, because I had to deal with some really horrendous stuff.

SR: Probably, yeah.

BZ: But overall, I think I got more satisfaction out of that role than any other role that I've had in the university.

SR: That's terrific.

BZ: I know! It seems so surprising. And the only regret I have is that I hadn't gone into administration about ten years earlier. I mean, it's only a minor regret, it's not a big deal. But I think I would have liked to have been a provost. But I would have had to move into administration in my forties, I think, in order to actually have that, because I didn't want to work until seventy. And I really didn't want to move around the country. So it turned out to be perfect.

SR: Well that's great! That's great. It certainly is a fascinating pathway that you've had.

BZ: I think all stories, obviously, are retrospective, and all histories are *obviously*—this is a tautology—they're retrospective, but there's a certain profundity to this because while you're experiencing your life you really don't know what the narrative is. It's only after it's over. That's why Aristotle says, "The only happy life is at the end." It's only when you look back at the very end that you can say somebody was happy or somebody was not. I've reached the end of my career. There were some parts of it that were really very unpleasant, and there's one big event part of it I won't talk about at all. So it wasn't perfect. It was not always happy. And there were clearly things that I wish could have happened differently, but overall, I look back at, if I go back, let's say, thirty-two years at San Diego, but really it goes back further than that, even to the beginning of women's studies in 1969, (sigh), I can't think of very many people who have had a more well-rounded and satisfying and productive career. I feel like I made a difference, that I've left a mark. I'm proud of what I did. I took pleasure. I created good friends. And I'm a happy person.

SR: That's an accomplishment—it is.

BZ: So I guess we're at the point now where I have retired, and first of all I want to say that it is an amazing achievement to have come to this point in one's life—especially since I think all of us probably feel this way—I still think I must be twenty-five, so how is it that I possibly can be retiring? And it's also a fabulous—I guess it's just a privilege and an honor and a great big piece of luck to even be able to retire these days. I am acutely aware of what a privilege we

have to have retirement plans. That is something that I thank San Diego State, and California State University for.

You know, it's been interesting now. I've been retired for about four months and I've never been as busy. I think a lot of people say that. But I don't have any great desire to go back to anything that I've done in my career. A lot of academics look forward to writing and doing more research. I don't, I really don't. I have said what I have to say, and I no longer wish to write. I'm not highly active in the university. That could change. I could see getting involved in certain things. I speak occasionally in a class, or would come to some events. I support the university financially in certain ways and all. But it feels like after a very long career in which my work was really the central focus of my life, especially these past seven years with the nine-to-five—much more than nine-to-five—but five days a week, regular job, no long summer breaks and all of that, in which I've really focused on work, and that's been the priority.

What's really nice is now shifting that priority to my partner and myself and what *we* want out of life, what *she* wants out of life, because for so much of the past thirty years that we've been together, I put my work first, and kind of had to—which is not to say that we haven't had all kinds of wonderful experiences, and she really enjoyed being part of the women's studies community as well—not so much the administrators community. She never really liked going to any of the administrators parties and stopped doing it. But now that's the priority, and it's something different. I'm reflecting more on other parts of myself and who I am, and who I want to be in these however many years I have left. And it is kind of

weird to look forward and realize that the biggest part of your life is now past. And also to focus more on simple pleasures, and the daily-ness of life. And when you're working, you just don't—I didn't, at least—notice the daily-ness of life. But, you know, there are things like, oh, going shopping, and cleaning the house, and how did I ever deal with all of the repair people? I actually didn't. It's a very different rhythm. It's a fabulous thing to get up in the morning when you want to get up, instead of when you have to get up. It's a fabulous thing to say, "I don't have to cram all the pleasure into the weekend." It's wonderful to say, "Today is a bright and sunny day—I will play. And tomorrow is a cold and rainy day—I'll stay in and cuddle up and read a book." So I think that I highly recommend retirement to everybody! So that's pretty much—I think that pretty much brings it all. I don't feel like my life is at an end, but I do feel that my career is at an end, and now I'm doing something else, which is called living.

SR: Wonderful. Well, it certainly has been a privilege and a pleasure to conduct this oral history with you, and thank you very much.

BZ: You're welcome!

[END OF INTERVIEW]