

UC Santa Cruz

Out in the Redwoods

Title

Wendy Chapkis: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965-2003

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4hr36750>

Authors

Chapkis, Wendy
Reti, Irene H.
Bennett, Elizabeth

Publication Date

2004-04-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4hr36750#supplemental>

WENDY CHAPKIS



Photo of Wendy Chapkis by Wilton Woods, Queer Nation action at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, Circa 1990

Interviewer, Elizabeth Bennett: *Wendy Chapkis was an undergraduate at UCSC from 1973 to 1977, a graduate student in sociology from 1985 to 1995, and lecturer in women's studies, politics and other departments. She was a co-founder of the Bulkhead Gallery, and is a queer activist and writer. Her book *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* was published by South End Press in 1986, and *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* by Routledge in 1997. She is currently a professor of women's studies at the University of Southern Maine.*

Bennett: Please tell me about your background—where and when you were born, where you grew up, and a sketch of your family.



Chapkis: I was born in Los Angeles, California in 1954. I was the first child of Robert and Marjorie Chapkis. My parents were both very young when I was born, and I think I was the only unplanned pregnancy. I was born in the first year of their marriage. My father was in college and my mother was working. I spent the first five years in southern California; then my dad graduated and got a job in Washington State so we moved north for a couple of years. My brother Steve was born up there and then we moved back south for my father to do his graduate work at Stanford. My sister Karen was born the year my father finished his Ph.D.

Many of my most formative experiences were in graduate student housing at Stanford University. It was an incredible place to be in the 1960s, very multicultural, very international. The graduate student housing at the time was in old mental institution barracks from World War II, which didn't bother me as a kid, but probably was a little depressing for my folks. The walls were really thick. They were kind of ugly buildings but they were indestructible. It was great. I grew up with a tremendous sense of the importance of education. My parents were both first generation college-educated. Education was definitely important.

We went back to southern California when I was in junior high school. But I felt more at home in northern California, so I decided to go to the university back up here. UC Santa Cruz was very much my first choice. I graduated from high school in 1972, and had already spent a few months as an exchange student in the Netherlands in 1970, and decided right after high school to be an exchange student again, this time for a year to France. So I delayed going to university for a year. After I came back, I came to UCSC.

Bennett: How did you end up at UCSC?

Chapkis: It was the place to go in the late-1960s and early-1970s for someone who was politically radical and had an alternate view of education. It was still very experimental. I had been a political kid, who knows why. It's hard to explain those things when you are really little, but probably because of the Vietnam War, which was really formative when I was growing up. Obviously, I was too young to have lots of friends who were being drafted, but I was old enough that it was part of my consciousness growing up. It seemed like a terrible thing to me. And also, having grown up in such a multicultural environment, the racial politics of the United States were very disturbing to me. I was in southern California when the Watts riots happened in the late-1960s, and that was also very formative to me. And I lived in Los Angeles when the air quality was so bad... I



actually lived in a suburb of Los Angeles where the air quality was quite good, but as soon as you went over the hill and went down in the basin, it was like people were living in a poisoned fishbowl. It seemed just insane to me. That helped to awaken my early environmental consciousness. Rather than being an odd person with a political consciousness, I wanted to be somewhere where that was the norm. UCSC was clearly the place to be. So I came.

Also, the year between high school and college when I had lived in France was very important to me. It was the last year of the Vietnam War and the French were very anti-American foreign policy. It was kind of ironic because the French had had their own history in Vietnam, but the young French were incredibly critical of U.S. actions in Vietnam and just of the U.S. generally. This was a new experience for me, to be somewhere where people were critical of my country. It was difficult to be a representative of a country in a place where people were very hostile to it. I had spent part of that year when I was living in France organizing a big fundraising event for UNICEF and Oxfam. It was a “Walk for Hunger.” We raised twenty or thirty thousand dollars. And, right before the march happened, I was confronted by a group of French high school students who took me aside and said, “Obviously, you are a good organizer and your heart is in the right place, but how can you possibly be doing development work and anti-poverty work without any acknowledgement of the place U.S. imperialism plays in the impoverishment of the Third World?” I had no idea what they were talking about, but I got that it was something I had better learn about.

So when I came back, I came to Merrill College to study. Its emphasis was Third World nations. I started studying U.S. foreign policy, was increasingly horrified and more and more radicalized, and became a pretty big activist around divestment from South Africa. The first year I was at UCSC was the end of the Vietnam War, the coup in Chile, and the impeachment of Richard Nixon. That was all happening around the time. So it was an incredibly rich political mix.

It was also the beginning of the women’s movement, and that was incredibly exciting to me. I had grown up with all of the prejudices that most of my female friends had about women, which were that women were petty and uninteresting and interested only in really trivial things, and that men or boys were much more interesting. We thought this without ever acknowledging that it was a weird thing to be a woman and think all those things. After all, I wasn’t interested in trivial or uninteresting things. But I just didn’t get the contradiction.



When I was hitting puberty, I did a major transformation from being a very gawky, funny looking pre-teen girl with braces and freckles and a bad haircut, skinny as a rail and all that, to that wild transformation that happens when you get breasts and the braces come off and you have long blond hair and blue eyes and a tan. Suddenly I became this beach babe from southern California with all kinds of sexual power around boys. I actually remember the first time I was out on a date and this guy kissed me and he said, "Oh Wendy, I love you." I thought, wow he knows absolutely nothing about me. I had done nothing except sort of cultivate him through this date, pay attention and act interested. And he was smitten with me! That was amazing. I thought wow, I can really fool guys and manipulate them in some interesting ways. I took dating very seriously. I remember checking out books on the Green Bay Packers to read because one of the guys I was dating was a Green Bay Packer fan. I prepped for my dates, and got good at it, and got a lot of power from it in some ways.

Then the year I lived in France I fell really head-over-heels in love with another woman who was an American *au pair* with a French family. We didn't really have a name for what we felt and we didn't do very much about it. But I was smitten. I was really taken by her. When I came back to the U.S. and started school at UCSC and got involved in the women's movement, I realized that one of the reasons that I had all these hostile attitudes towards women was that I was really afraid that women would be able to see through me. While I had developed this way of mesmerizing men, I knew that no woman would fall for that. They would know. They knew how to do it too. And nobody would like me if they really knew me. It was a very twisted set of attitudes.

I got involved in a consciousness-raising group at Merrill College. This would have been 1973 and 1974. We were a group of really oddball characters. These were women with whom I otherwise never would have had any contact. One was into astral projection. Another one was going to be a midwife. There was this whole range. I think they all identified as heterosexual when we first started the group. We met once a week and talked about life experiences, with a different theme every week. I grew to enjoy this more than anything else that was going on, and was astonished to know that not only did people like me, but I was accepted and adored in the same way that I was adoring these very diverse women. That's when I went to my first Holly Near concert, and Cris Williamson, and got all of the Redwood records and played them endlessly. It was an incredibly exhilarating time.



Part of that exhilaration was falling in love with women as a class. I think early feminism was very erotic, even for women who never came out. It was exciting and we were making a revolution. We really were. There were all of these: "An Army of Lovers Will Never Be Defeated" magnets on everybody's refrigerators. Everybody wanted to be a dyke, even if some of us weren't sure we could be. I kept trying to be one for my entire four years at UCSC. Well, actually I was here for three years because my junior year I went back to the Netherlands and went to the University of Amsterdam for a year. I lived with this Dutch guy I had selected many years before to lose my virginity with. When I was living in France, he was the only male I knew living on the European continent. I had seen sex as a way to get rid of something, my virginity, that was a barrier, both literally and symbolically, to going to college and being able to be sexually active. So sex with him was really instrumental for me. But of course it all became much more complicated than that. In fact, I went back to live with him for a year and to study in Amsterdam during my junior year to see if we could make something more permanent happen. Instead, that was the year that I came out, more or less. I started going to gay bars in the Netherlands. It was really a trip. It was 1975, the United Nations International Year of Women, and I would travel from international conference to international conference soaking up this rich feminist international community, and then return to this impoverished newlywed life. We were living in a cold water walk-up flat, and I was really isolated because I didn't speak very much Dutch at the time. I was going to classes in the university, but I understood one of every five words. Then at night when he was studying I'd go out and explore the gay bars.

Anyway, I came back my senior year determined to finally have sex with a woman, really be a lesbian. I spent that year trying to make that happen, and failing miserably. But it was really clear that this was something that I wanted to have be a part of my life. I think it was during my senior year at UCSC that I walked in the first Gay Pride parade in Santa Cruz. We walked down Pacific Avenue. It was a very small group, and I remember this woman (whose name I do not know, but I have seen her over the decades in Santa Cruz), who was walking along the side of the group telling us, "Smile at people. We need to make a good impression. And we should be singing." The song she wanted us all to sing is, "We are a Gentle, Loving People," by Holly Near. People were all very frightened. I don't remember feeling frightened, but I remember her. She was a little older than me, and it was a big deal to be coming out and walking down Pacific Avenue. Her sense was that hostility was very likely and we needed to disarm people by showing how friendly and loving and gentle we were.



Bennett: What year was that?

Chapkis: I think it was probably 1976 or 1977. I always felt a little bit like an imposter because I hadn't really had sex with a woman yet, and here I was participating in Gay Pride parades.

After I graduated, I decided not to go on to law school or graduate school, and not to go back to the Netherlands and marry Piet and settle down. Instead, I went to Mexico with another Merrill student, Margie Miller, who is now a well-established journalist with the *Los Angeles Times*. We lived in Oaxaca and learned Spanish and hung out. When I came back I started applying for jobs. When I began to send out my resumé I thought it would look good to note that I spoke a couple of foreign languages, Dutch, French, and Spanish, never thinking that Dutch would ever be advantageous for anything. But I got a call from somebody from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., who asked me, "Do you speak Dutch? We have an international research center in Amsterdam and we're looking for somebody to be an administrator there for a year or so." I had just broken up with Piet, and here I was going to be sent back to the Netherlands. But it was an offer that I couldn't refuse. So I went back for what I thought would be a year and I stayed ten. I spent most of the mid-1970s to mid-1980s in Europe, in the Netherlands. It's where I came out, had a Dutch girlfriend...first a Canadian girlfriend and then a Dutch girlfriend.

Finally at the end of that period I decided that I was either going to stay (I had permanent residency) or I had to go back to the U.S. It was clear that I had bought a lot of things that wouldn't fit in a suitcase anymore. I really lived there; I really spoke Dutch. In fact my relationship was all in Dutch because she didn't speak much English. I had established myself there.

But it had been a brutal experience. I had experienced constant harassment every time I left the house, not for being a lesbian, but for being gender-confusing to people because I had facial hair. I think it was partly that they were confused, and that made them uncomfortable. But it's also that the Netherlands have a culture that prides itself on tolerance, so people have to tolerate a lot of things, but there are certain categories of difference that people don't feel like they have to be tolerant of. And for some reason, a woman with a moustache is one of those categories. It was sort of like the way fat women are treated in this culture. You are "allowed" to make fun of them. This was freakish behavior that somebody presumably could fix, and therefore I was an open



target. I had no skills for dealing with that. I had grown up a blond, blue-eyed babe from southern California; I was from a middle-class family; and I was American. Skills in how to deal with harassment when I was being whistled at I had cultivated through the women's movement, but skills in how to say fuck off to somebody who was mocking me, or surrounding and touching me, that I didn't have. It was brutal. Actually, I ended up writing a book based on that. That was my first book.³⁹

Toward the end of that period in the Netherlands I thought, do I really want to stay in this culture? The Netherlands is fabulous in many, many ways. Amsterdam is a great city in many ways. But I had really grown tired of the gray and the rain. I had grown tired of the harassment. My relationship with my girlfriend was a mess and we were talking about having a kid and buying a house. I thought, if I do that I am never leaving. This is it. I think I'll go back to the States and try it for a year, see if after a decade of being an expatriot if I can live in the States anymore.

I didn't want to come back and be unemployed and broke and simultaneously dealing with culture shock. So I decided to come back to Santa Cruz and go to graduate school. I had the book *Beauty Secrets* coming out, which I had written in the last few years I was living in the Netherlands. So I knew I was a pretty strong candidate to get into the graduate program at UCSC. And I also knew that I would like to live in Santa Cruz; it wasn't a place where I had to worry about whether or not I would be comfortable. I knew I would. Unlike graduate students these days I was offered full support for the time I would be there. Not fellowships, but TAships. So I had a job. They offered me money. I thought, this is great. I can go back to the States. I can live somewhere I want to live and I have a job.

The other piece of it was that I had worked in this political research center for many years where I had been kind of a glorified secretary. Even though I basically ran the place and edited books and did all that stuff, I was just a young woman with a B.A. I had no doubt that getting more letters after my name would help establish greater authority for me. I'd get more credibility for my writing. I thought, well I'll do it for a couple of years; that will give me a foothold in the States, and I'll either decide I can't live there and go back to the Netherlands, or I'll stay.

³⁹Wendy Chapkis. *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1986).



When I had lived in Santa Cruz, before I was straight, more or less. So I thought maybe I'll come back and get involved with men again. Who knows? I was coming out of a very, very tough relationship with my Dutch girlfriend. I no longer had the kind of early feminist illusions that relationships with women were going to be so qualitatively different than relationships with men, that there would be no power struggles and no abuse issues, and co-dependency, that everything would be different because it was a relationship between two women. I no longer thought that. I had plenty of experience to the contrary. I thought, well I certainly wouldn't put up with the shit I am putting up with from women if I was involved with men. I think it might even be easier to be involved with men.

But within a week or two of returning to Santa Cruz, I was invited to a meeting of an organized research cluster on campus called the Feminist Studies FRA—focused research activity. They held a meeting at the beginning of the quarter, in the fall, to welcome women graduate students and faculty. Everybody met down at the Women's Center. We were kind of milling around. There were hors d'oeuvres and it was very social. I was meeting people, and heard this woman with a French accent on the other side of the room, whipped around and looked at her and thought, oh boy. I met Nathalie, who was a graduate student in the History of Consciousness department, and got swept up into her circle of friends, a bunch of wonderful and very neurotic Hist Con students. Within the first quarter she and I were lovers and it was clear that I wasn't coming back to Santa Cruz to become straight.

She and I did all kinds of interesting lesbian and feminist organizing on campus and in the community for the three years that we were together. It was probably 1987 when we did a conference called "Representations of our (R)age." It was feminist art activism. We brought people like Jill Posener, who was the photo editor of *On Our Backs*, a lesbian sex magazine, and Jan Zita Grover and...Cheryl Dunye who did the film *Watermelon Women*. It was a great conference. We did an installation at the Women's Center and we had a couple of days of speakers. It was really fabulous.

Because it was the mid- to late-1980s, feminist sex radicalism was really an active presence in the feminist community, and I was really involved early on. Over the years working in Amsterdam, I had met a number of the key figures in that movement, like Pat Califia, who became a friend. S/he moved to the West Coast around the same time that I moved back to the States, and s/he started organizing sex parties in San Francisco that I got involved with, too. I started going to those and got a little bit involved with the



leather scene there and the public sex scene. It was really incredibly fun, but as you can imagine it was also complicated within the context of the relationship. Our relationship was kind of troubled by the second or third year anyway. By the third year, she and I had both become involved with Gabriel, who was a local political activist and artist, a wild woman. Gabriel had started a local gallery with a group of other artists, called The Bulkhead, on Bulkhead Street downtown. At the time that I first met Gabriel they were doing mostly 2D and 3D stuff in the gallery.

But there was kind of an explosion in the group running the gallery. Clearly, it was going to either shut down or transform. We ended up transforming it. We had a queer crew and turned it into a queer performance space. It was this tiny, tiny space on Bulkhead Street. And as Gabriel and I became more involved, and Nathalie and I broke up, I became one of the Bulkhead Collective members. We did all kinds of events: writers reading from their works, and theater pieces. Local and regional artists performed.

Increasingly, what I ended up doing was connecting the University with the community through the Bulkhead Gallery. I think the first Bulkhead event that had some University money associated with it, maybe through a community service grant, was a thing called “Wild Women, Wicked Words,” in 1992. That was held downtown in the Bulkhead Gallery, and a lot of people from UCSC, from the college community, came down to it. With people performing like Dorothy Allison and Pat Califia and Mary Wings and Gloria Anzaldúa, it was a Who’s Who of lesbian fiction. They all read in this tiny little performance space.

I think that might have been the same year that I first taught *Queer Politics*. It was between 1990 and 1993, in that period in any case, when I first taught... I think it was called *Gay and Lesbian Politics*. It got re-named *Queer Politics* the second time I taught it. It was the only regularly scheduled gay and lesbian class at UCSC. It had been taught by David Thomas prior to that. He was really a trailblazer on this campus, for getting a class that had gay and lesbian in the title on the schedule every year. I was going to TA for him. But he had plans to go on leave that quarter. I had been TAing up until that time, and had never taught my own class. But I immediately called him up and said, “Gee David. I’d really like to teach that class. I think it would be great if we could offer the class and I really want to try my hat at teaching.” He said okay.

That was the first class that I ever taught. I think it took place in the spring of that year. In the winter there had been a huge campus demonstration by what was called the Queer



and Colored Coalition. It was students of color and gay and lesbian students demanding more funding to hire faculty of color, to create more courses on race and ethnicity, and offer more courses on queer issues. There had been demonstrations. It had been a very successful organizing effort. I can't remember what we won, but it was an incredibly exciting time around coalition-building, with various minority communities on campus coming together. So here I am, teaching my very first class in the aftermath of this very successful organizing effort, and over a hundred students turn up. My first time out, I was teaching a big lecture class in Classroom Unit 1 or 2.

It was an extraordinary experience. I actually wrote about it, and [my essay] was published in an anthology called *Tilting the Tower*.⁴⁰ I believe the article was called "Explicit Instruction." I decided that I would be as absolutely radical and unafraid in teaching this class as I could imagine. I would teach all of the things that I thought were most interesting and most controversial in queer politics, because I thought, quite rightly, that the more you become invested in academia, the more you have to lose, and the more inclined you are towards self-censorship. You start to get rewards for being within the institution, and those escalate when you get a tenure-track job. You want to keep your job and you want to get tenure. So I knew that for the next ten years or so, at least, the pressures would be increasingly intense to tone myself down and be safe. I thought, well, I'll start off with a bang. So I did. I organized the class covering all the areas in what was then contemporary queer politics that I thought were edgy issues. For example, the porn debate, SM and leather, intergenerational sex, public sex, anonymous sex, bisexuality. It seems hard to imagine now, but bisexuality was a really explosive issue on campus and in the larger community at the time. Was bisexuality a queer identity? Were these interlopers? Were these people fence-sitting? Was it just another sexual orientation? The class dealt with a whole range of controversial issues.

Because it was my first time out and I had endless energy and excitement about doing this, I put more energy into teaching that class than I will probably ever put into teaching another class for the rest of my life. I got a community service grant so that students could do events at the Bulkhead Gallery downtown as their final projects. They could create whatever they wanted, and they had access to the space and some funding to do it. Various groups did various things, but two groups turned the Bulkhead Gallery into a bar. The boys, interestingly, turned it into a pre-AIDS 1970s bar, and the young women in the class turned it into a 1950s butch-femme bar. We had read *Beebo Brinker* and Joan

⁴⁰Linda Garber, ed. *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 1994).



Nestle and a bunch of butch-femme literature. [The women] romanticized the 1950s in the same way that the men in the class romanticized the 1970s. The men created a club scene with a glory hole space and disco music. The women who did the 1950s bar did this really great re-enactment of the 1950s butch-femme bar; they even staged a police raid. It got a lot of press, especially the 1950s bar, and the owner of the building read about it in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* and called the managers of the building and told them to evict us. This must have been in early 1989. Teaching that class was a great experience; it was wild and exciting.

That same year, I think, was the year that I started doing what was then the only gay and lesbian radio program on KUSP, "Radio Q." My partner Gabriel and her brother, Peter Brown, and I started an one hour, once-a-month, noon on Fridays queer program. Because we were all part of the Bulkhead as well, we had access to all of these talented people who were reading and performing in town so we put a lot of that taped material on the air. I particularly remember Pat Califia reading a piece about public sex that had a in it about, "cum in a queer boy's butt." This went out at noon on a Friday and Radio Q was in big trouble.

By the late-1980s, feminist sex radicalism had run pretty much head-on into feminist anti-porn anti-prostitution, anti-SM activism. The Bulkhead was very much positioned as a sex radical kind of an organization. We had some of the big names—both men and women who were known nationally and regionally as members of the "perv" community coming to Santa Cruz. People like Kevin Killian, Dodie Belamy, Dennis Cooper, Wayne Corbitt, Dorothy Allison, Danielle Willis, and so on. We were hosting them, and we were also broadcasting them on our radio show. That caused huge consternation among anti-SM feminists in town, including, most notably, Ann Simonton, who runs Media Watch. The whole thing really exploded at the end of the 1980s. 1989 was also the year of the big earthquake, and that was the thing that finally caused the Bulkhead Gallery as a space to close. Our space was red-tagged. Anyway, that was the excuse the owners gave us. They said they weren't going to evict us because of the queer stuff that went on, even though Santa Cruz didn't have an anti-discrimination ordinance yet. They knew that would be politically unpopular. But they could throw us out because the building had been red-tagged and needed retrofitting [after the earthquake].

So we lost our performance space. What we did instead was to rent other existing venues for specific events. We did our first series after the earthquake in the Art Center downtown. That was, of course, shortly after the Gulf War. It seemed to us that dissent



was being muffled by excessive displays of the American flag, and yellow ribbons and “United We Stand,” all in support of the glory of the U.S. military machine. Many of us, myself included, had done absolutely everything we could to stop that war, and when we were unable to do so, we were left feeling completely silenced by the patriotic fervor that a war creates in this country.

So we decided to do a series called “Disturbing the Peace.” We organized a series of radical queer culture downtown, the most controversial was [inviting] Fakir Musafar to town to do a performance piece called the “Torture Circus,” involving SM and massive radical piercings. Ann Simonton bought a ticket and sat front-row-center. After the performance, she called all of our advertisers and threatened a boycott of all of them if they didn’t disassociate from the rest of the series. The series, incidentally, included everything from the Latino lesbian and gay organization [LLEGO] doing a poetry reading, to Doug Holsclaw coming down from San Francisco to do a great theater piece, “Don’t Make Me Say Things That’ll Hurt You.” All of this very diverse culture she would have had advertisers cut their funding for, because we had also hosted Musafar and she found it offensive. We became embroiled in a very big political battle for months. It was pretty awful for the Bulkhead, and personally pretty awful for me. I think the low point for me was when somebody scrawled on the wall of the Saturn Cafe: “Wendy Chapkis promotes violence against women and encourages rape.” I remember seeing that, and thinking okay, it can’t get much lower than this. My name is being scrawled on bathroom walls. It was awful. It was really ugly. And it really, really divided the feminist community in Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz is this interesting place in that it has created and sustained both very high profile anti-prostitution, anti-SM, anti-pornography, anti-anonymous-sex feminist activists like Nicki Craft and Ann Simonton, and feminist sex radicals like Susie Bright, or myself. We have all been nurtured and produced by the same community. It’s an interesting and odd thing and that all came to a head in the late-1980s and early-1990s.

Despite the controversy, we continued to do Bulkhead events. In 1994, we did a series called “Shockwave” up at UCSC, at Kresge College. it was primarily queer performance artists of color. Amazing performances by the Pomo Afro Homos, Canyon Sam, and others. It was a wonderful series that played to sold-out crowds. The following year we did another series called “The Power of One,” which centered its image on the Chinese civilian standing in Tiananmen Square stopping a row of tanks with just his body. That was the series of all-solo artists. In the early-1990s, the Bulkhead brought incredible



queer culture to campus. Around that time, 1994, I taught *Queer Politics* for the second time.

Bennett: So you did decide to go beyond the master's degree in sociology?

Chapkis: I did. I was clearly totally caught up in it all.

Bennett: Was the course offered through sociology or women's studies?

Chapkis: Women's studies. The first time I taught it, it was through the politics board, because David Thomas, who ordinarily taught the class, was a politics professor. The next time I taught it though I think it was through women's studies. By then, I knew I would complete my Ph.D. in sociology with a notation in women's studies.

I had decided that I would write my dissertation on the feminist sex wars, since it was so much in my face all the time. I had worked my way through what I thought about pornography, but I really hadn't figured out what I thought about prostitution. I had lived in the Netherlands for ten years and had had very visible, but decriminalized, prostitution confronting me every day.

Then I came back to this county, which was under the reign of Al Noren, who was a law and order, anti-vice sheriff. He was doing things like shutting down all of the massage parlors in town that had operated since I was an undergraduate here, for instance the Staircase Massage Parlor down on Front Street, which had been here for as long as I had been here. He did very high-profile busts on all of those places and shut them down. At the exact same time, he set up this big media event where he went out and caught men having sex with men at a rest stop [Vista Point] on the way to Watsonville. He went out with a TV crew and the press to photograph men being taken out of the bushes. I thought, okay, there's a link here. The people who think it's okay to arrest consenting adults who are having unpaid sex, but are having sex in ways that they don't approve of, are the same people who are arresting working women who are having sex for money and their clients. I found that very troubling, so I decided that would be my dissertation. I spent the next far too many years working on that, including finally going back to Amsterdam on a Fulbright in 1994 to do comparative work and then came back for one final year, and finally got my degree in 1995, about ten years after I started my Ph.D.



I had to leave Santa Cruz, because I couldn't get a job here. But they had to pry me out with a crowbar. I would have desperately taken anything they had offered. I just couldn't get a job that was beyond quarter-to-quarter. So I took a tenure-track job at the University of Southern Maine. I have to say that I was worried when I went out on the job market whether it would be possible to get a job, given what my CV looked like. My first teaching job at UCSC was *Gay and Lesbian Politics*. I had taught it twice. I had taught a women's studies class on the Clarence Thomas hearings on sexual harassment, when Clarence Thomas was in front of the Supreme Court. My Ph.D. was on sex work. It was this feminist, sex-drenched, radical CV. There was no way to hide that.

I think it probably did narrow the number of jobs that I would be of interest for. But on the other hand, it also meant that when I was hired it was because of, rather than in spite of the fact that I did that kind of work, was a queer, was a feminist. I was hired as a joint appointment in women's studies and sociology, in a position where I was encouraged to teach the sociology of sexuality and bring that experience with me.

Bennett: So you got that job straight out of here after you got your Ph.D?

Chapkis: Yes. I got tenure last year. I'm back here this year on sabbatical, and I've been doing new research. As I say, I did sex for fifteen years. Now I'm doing drugs. I'm burned out on sex and I'm studying drug policy, and the policing of consciousness by the state. I'm interested in what's at stake in wanting to criminalize people who are altering their consciousness with psychedelics, or marijuana, or any other substance, actually. I'm interviewing medical marijuana patients, many of whom are at their end-of-life stages of their diseases. I'm talking to them about death-and-dying consciousness, and pain.

Bennett: How has it been going from Santa Cruz to southern Maine?

Chapkis: Well, I thought it would be much more of a shock, but in fact Portland, Maine is really environmentally similar to Santa Cruz. It's a small coastal city, bigger than Santa Cruz, but it's not so big that it feels like a big city at all, although it is the biggest city in Maine. It has three gay bars and a great museum and terrific restaurants and great cafes. It's a very livable small city and it's on the ocean. I can bicycle along the Eastern Prom, which is very much like bicycling along West Cliff. It's along the water. It's within a fifteen-minute drive to the woods. The woods are different. They are not redwoods. But at least I can get into the forest really easily. I can get away from people very easily. It's a



progressive city in the midst of a state that's a mixed bag. In fact, when I first moved there in 1995 or 1996, I just fell in love with the place. I thought, this is great. Plus, having lived in the Netherlands for ten years, it was a nice... People kept saying it must be very culturally different than Santa Cruz. It is, in some ways, although because it's all brick and it snows in the winter, it reminded me more of Amsterdam. Yet compared to Amsterdam, it's so American. The people speak English. They're friendly. They smile at you on the street. All those sorts of American qualities that are accentuated in California certainly exist in Maine. So it felt very familiar, very comfortable to me. I was at an institution that really appreciated me and treated me well, and I loved the fact that the students were a mix of traditional age and re-entry students. We have a large minority of re-entry students. Those were all things that made me fall in love with the place.

And the city had just passed an anti-discrimination law protecting the civil rights of gay and lesbian people in Portland. And the university had just passed a domestic partners regulation providing health benefits to partners of gay and lesbian employees, which was before UC did it. So I felt like I had just arrived in this fabulous place. And then, within a year, the Maine state house and senate and governor signed into law a statewide gay rights law. It was incredibly moving. People had been working for more than twenty years to get this passed. It had gotten through one house but not the other, or they had gotten it through both, but it had been vetoed by the governor. Well, finally they got it through both houses. It got signed into law, and there was this hugely exciting moment where gay rights were protected in the state of Maine.

The University was setting up a "Gay and Lesbian Archive," which actually now exists at USM. We were talking about setting up a Queer, Gay Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered Studies program at USM. And in that glorious moment the Religious Right mobilized. They got the Christian Coalition to send in a ton of money, and the Christian Coalition and the Christian Civic League collected signatures to put a referendum on the ballot to repeal the ordinance. It was a special election held in February. Under twenty-five percent of the electorate turned out for the election; the referendum passed, which meant that gay rights were repealed, by two percentage points. A tiny percentage of the Maine electorate repealed civil rights for gays and lesbians. It felt like such a kick in the gut. I wrote this flaming piece, not about the Christian Right, but about the apathy of our so-called allies in the heterosexual community. Opinion polls indicated that most likely voters in Maine thought, oh yes, gay and lesbian people should have civil rights. But then they didn't vote. That piece



was published in the *Lavender Reader* in Santa Cruz in 1996; it was called “Mainely Indifferent.”

I wanted to leave. I had been looking for a house to buy in Maine and I thought, I refuse to stay in this place, in a place where I don’t have basic civil rights. But I had a job there. The city of Portland still had voted overwhelmingly in favor of civil rights for gays and lesbians. It’s sort of like being in Portland, Oregon. It’s this island of progressive politics in a state that’s largely very conservative. I also felt like, what am I going to run away to?

For the next couple of years we battled to get another referendum on the ballot that would reinstate gay rights. That too finally made it onto the ballot and was defeated. The Christian Right mobilized again. So twice, gay rights have been struck down in Maine, and it feels like a much less glorious place to live now. It’s the same kind of exhaustion and grief that I have over living in the United States in this period. Horrible, horrible things are happening, and I keep thinking we’ll wake up and stop, but so far that hasn’t happened. I keep reminding myself that the 1960s followed the 1950s. McCarthyism wasn’t the last word, and probably the Bush *coup d’etat* won’t be the last word in this country. If we survive the war-without-end policy, something good might come on the other side of this. But right now I am feeling very despairing. I think that’s actually the reason that I’ve switched gears from doing work on sex and pleasure, to doing work on drugs and consciousness. Not that drugs aren’t about pleasure for some people too. But increasingly I feel that I need to develop tools to deal with despair; that’s a conversation about consciousness more than it is anything else, how to keep yourself sane and steady when the Right is ascending.

Bennett: You talked some about coming out, and being back and forth on that. I wanted to know more about what that was like for you, the process of coming out, both to yourself and also to people around you.

Chapkis: Yes, well I wasn’t one of those people who always knew I was a lesbian, although it’s true that my very first sexual experience at age ten was with a girl. So it wasn’t like—*I can’t imagine ever doing that!* But I had a very active heterosexual life in high school and college, my undergraduate years. I knew that it wasn’t like, oh men aren’t sexually interesting to me, and therefore I must be a lesbian. It was more like, women are really scary and fascinating to me and I wonder if I can be a lesbian? And because it was a part of feminism, sexuality was a political aspect of life. That was very clear to me. My relationships with men were really about power: everything from my



early experiences of feeling so empowered by their willingness to fall in love with me based on the most superficial things, all the way to later power struggles with men over my position as a heterosexual woman. I think that was a large part of wanting to be a lesbian—I do not want to be a heterosexual woman. I do not want to be some man’s helpmate. And that was kind of the model that existed. Even within the Left, women were still fighting against that. And that was the origins of the women’s movement, right? Fighting against the expectation to make the coffee while the men made all the decisions.

I really wanted to be a dyke, and just didn’t know if I could, if that would be an erotic possibility for me. I was really relieved when it was. I was thrilled. [laughter] But I’ve never felt like I was one of those lesbians where it wasn’t a matter of choice and my genes made me do it. There was always some anxiety over whether or not I was a real lesbian.

When I was teaching *Gay and Lesbian Politics* at UCSC the first time, I taught a section on bisexuality, and I remember teaching it with a question mark. Was bisexuality a queer identity? In part that was because, for me, my association with the word *bisexual* was swingers. Was it a kind of straight soft-porn version of bisexuality, where women could have sex with men but women could also have sex with women? In that version, women have sex with women because men think that it is hot. I couldn’t imagine wanting to identify with the word *bisexual* as I understood it. But there was an insurrection in my class. The bisexual students just went crazy, and there were lots of them. In fact, most of the students in that *Queer Politics* class who identified as not-heterosexual identified as bisexual. I realized that there was a generational difference here, that this was an identity that they were claiming, that didn’t mean what it did to me. So by the second time I taught it, the question mark was gone. Bisexual was a queer identity, and I tried to teach it that way.

Clearly, my own anxiety around bisexuality was evident here. I did think in some way that bisexuality was associated with a level of privilege that gay and lesbian people didn’t have, and I resented that. I wanted bisexual people to identify as gay and lesbian. But since I’ve gotten older, I think I’ve just gotten a lot smarter about identity categories, number one. And I find that radical bisexual politics have also created a space for me to think about bisexuality in much more complex ways. Of course any identity is co-optable, but I’ve had to acknowledge that “bisexual” isn’t uniquely co-optable. I have also had to also acknowledge that my own sexuality is bisexual. It’s just that that’s not



my identity. My erotics are bisexual. My history is bisexual. But my identity... That still would be a hard identity for me to embrace; probably again it's a generational thing. It doesn't work so well for me.

But I love the identity "queer." I know it's got its own problems. But I think it's a very effective way to talk about non-normative sexuality, in that it's not just about the gender of your partner, or the sex of your partner. It's about claiming a sort of freak, outsider status. Those are my people.

Bennett: How did you educate yourself about becoming queer? Did you read books or talk to people?

Chapkis: Oh, I remember very distinctly going to Bookshop Santa Cruz and buying every book that was in the women's section. You could do that in those days. There were seven of them. I remember buying the one anthology I could find of coming out stories. So yes, there was that socialization that came from books.

And the feminist, the women's movement, women's culture, was very lesbian in those days. Cris Williamson, Teresa Trull, and Meg Christian—women's music, so-called, was really lesbian music. Even Holly Near came out pretty early on. I would go to those events and I was socialized into lesbian culture.

I don't remember ever taking anything at UCSC that had any queer content, as an undergraduate. It was partly because I was again focusing on international politics and looking at Third World-U.S. relations and that kind of thing. But it was also just prior to a women's studies program at UCSC. I never got to take *Introduction to Feminism* with Bettina Aptheker, or anything like that. I don't think that existed until after I graduated.

Bennett: You talked about Bulkhead a lot and it sounds like you were everywhere. But can you talk about the queer social scene?

Chapkis: It was great. It was exhilarating. What I think is amazing is that I actually managed to get a Ph.D. in the midst of all of this. That's probably why it took me ten years to do it.

By the time I moved back in the mid-1980s, Santa Cruz had a thriving queer community. The Gay Pride parades were no longer seven people walking along singing, "We are a Gentle, Loving People." In fact, I remember being at a dyke march a couple of years ago,



a huge gathering of a hundred or more wild dykes, many of whom weren't wearing their shirts. We had no permit to march. We were going to march through the streets without a permit, as they do every year at the dyke march in Santa Cruz. Clearly we were no longer so worried about people thinking we were a peaceful, loving people. Because the chant that year was, "We're lesbians. Don't fuck with us. We'll hurt you." It felt great.

So things have clearly really changed. I think that me and my gang were part of that transformation happening. I also noticed this year when I came back here after seven years of being in Maine that my time is now history. It's over. I used to really have a sense of myself as being at the very center of queer life in Santa Cruz. I was making it. I came back to find that, of course, there's a whole new generation of people making queer culture, and they don't know who I am, and I don't know who they are. Culture really changes in a decade. A totally new crowd. I think it's important that our stories are being captured now through this project. Because we do have a short-term memory problem. Stories get lost. People's history disappears.

Anyway, by the mid-1980s it was a vibrant political and cultural scene in town. And one of the things that was certainly happening, I think more than I'm noticing now, is that there was a real town and gown relationship. This was partly because I was at the University and I worked the University for funding that then went back into the community. And I'm seeing less of that. It may well be happening but I'm not seeing that so much. In the 1980s, I was using University money for everything that I could think of: for instance, the Bulkhead Gallery queer cultural productions, and funding for a fabulous calendar for WomenCare, the women's cancer support and education group downtown. Through a UCSC community service grant we got the University to do a bilingual Spanish-English calendar to raise money for WomenCare. There was a lot of that kind of thing happening, with University money being used to stage events in the community. Then the Bulkhead used University facilities like Kresge Town Hall to do performance series that were largely attended by people from the community. It was a large priority of mine to get people up here, so that this would not be a little island that locals feared or hated because it was driving up rents or clogging up the streets with student cars and stuff, but could also be a resource for the community. I think we did that very successfully for the years that the Bulkhead was happening.



In town, there was the Blue Lagoon [bar] and that was a vital center for the community. That was before the Blue Lagoon was overrun by young heterosexuals who were incredibly disrespectful of it as queer space.

And of course it was the late-1980s when I got involved with my partner, Gabriel. We've been together for thirteen years now. She and I, and Merrie Schaller, and Toni Cassista, and Pat Langlois and Dawn Atkins and a few others all got together to get a civil rights law passed in Santa Cruz. We wanted it to be the broadest-based civil rights law possible. So John Barisoni, the city attorney, looked at civil rights laws across the country. He had been meeting with the local National Organization for Women's Task Force on Body Image, who had been agitating for years to get some civil rights protections for fat women in this town. There is rampant discrimination based on weight. He found ordinances in Michigan and Washington, D.C., and a few other places that protected against discrimination on the basis of height, weight, and personal appearance, and so he drafted a law that would include sexual orientation, height, weight and personal appearance. We organized and got it before the city council, and they held a hearing in the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

The Christian Right came from all over the area came to oppose it, based on the gay rights part of it. Meanwhile, the national media, including Rush Limbaugh and all the major papers, and TV, and radio stations, picked up this wild thing that was happening in Santa Cruz, this crazy law that would protect people with purple hair and pierced tongues. They called it the "looks law." It was a fascinating moment, where the queer community was suddenly the respectable member of a coalition. The so-called "ridiculous" members of the coalition were the fat ladies and the freaks. The fags and dykes were okay. In the national press it was like: maybe those people, the gay folks, deserve civil rights, but certainly these other people, the freaks, don't.

The night of the hearing in the Civic Auditorium, the Santa Cruz City Council decided to separate out the "looks law" part from the sexuality part of the law, and they were going to pass the gay rights part. I rushed down and handed [then mayor] Neil Coonerty a note saying that it was my sense that the gay community did not want our rights separated out from the rest. He read it out-loud and they decided to postpone the vote. And oh my God, did I get in trouble! Because even though the handful of us who had been working in the coalition all agreed that we didn't want our rights separated out, the rest of the community, which of course had done nothing to get this law passed, was still furious that I had spoken for the community in that crucial moment. Here they had



almost had their rights and I postponed it. But it was one of those great moments where I thought, no, this is our opportunity to stand in solidarity.

What finally happened was that the law was rewritten. They took out “personal appearance” and replaced it with “physical characteristics.” Personal appearance was defined as things that you can change by choice, like your hair color and tattoos and piercings. Physical characteristics were things that you presumably have no control over. Like you were born with a cleft palette, rather than you had a pierced tongue. Or you lost all your hair through a medical condition, not because you shaved your head. Protection would only be available for people who were different because they couldn’t help but be different. It was so telling for me about the dangers of that strategy, the: “we can’t help ourselves strategy,” as if: “we would be just like you if we could. We’d be straight if we could. But since we can’t, don’t hurt us. We’d be thin if we could. We’d be normal if we could.” Anyway, that’s the law that we now have in Santa Cruz. The result is that people are routinely fired for things like piercings and radical haircuts and other things that businesses should have no right firing people for.

But anyway, it was an exciting opportunity to have an impact on local queer politics.

Bennett: So what was it like being up on campus then, and being so out?

Chapkis: I think it was pretty easy to be queer on campus, even in the early-1970s when we were having that small demonstration downtown. I don’t think it was popular to be a gay man on campus, actually, in those days. But in the midst of the women’s movement it was kind of the vanguard to be a dyke. But I can’t really speak to that because I wasn’t out. I wasn’t a dyke in the early-1970s. I was just a wanna be. It seemed to me that it was really glamorous and great, and everybody wanted to be one. Maybe I would have felt differently if I actually was out at that time.

By the time I came back in the mid-1980s, first of all, I was much older. I had gone through that really brutal experience in Amsterdam of being a freak, and developed some sense of how hostile the world is to people who are different, and it wasn’t always going to be: Oh, it’s great that you are a lesbian. It’s great that you are a gender freak. We think you are the super cool vanguard. I knew there were going to be lots of people who would be hostile to me. But moving from Amsterdam to Santa Cruz in those years was like slipping into a warm bath. I mean, maybe there were people who were going to be hostile, but it was few and far between compared to Amsterdam. Every time I’d leave



the house in Amsterdam I'd have to steel myself for the harassment that would happen, and every time I'd leave the house I'd be harassed. Whereas I moved to Santa Cruz and it was like—God, did the moustache disappear? Nobody has said a thing in months. It felt very comfortable to be who I was. Again, I was older. I was in my early-thirties. My thirties were a glorious decade. I felt powerful. I was confident. I was doing incredible things. I was making culture. I was making history. I was successfully teaching my own classes in queer politics. I was living a happy and comfortable life as a lesbian. So for me it was a real golden age.

Bennett: Do you see a few or lots of changes in the climate on campus as a whole, especially related to queer issues?

Chapkis: Yes, there's the GLBT Center, for instance, which did not exist. Deb Abbott and Patrick Letellier and that physical structure. When I taught gay and lesbian politics that first time, it still felt like we were just in the very early days of creating some kind of queer community on campus. There was a queer community downtown, but to have one that was visible and active on campus felt kind of new in the mid-1980s. I certainly don't feel like that's the case now.

It feels like there is organized, institutional support for the queer community in the form of the Center and staff. There're active student organizations that are doing fashion shows and other kinds of cultural events. Again, one difference though, is that those things feel really separate from the downtown community. There's a UCSC queer community that has its queer activities up here, but unless you are hooked to the University you wouldn't know about it if you were living in town, and vice versa. I just went to the Urvashi Vaid lecture downtown at the Del Mar, which was incredible! It was wonderful. And I kept thinking that it was fascinating that nobody from the community was directly involved in this. When I was a student, we certainly would have co-sponsored it with the Diversity Center downtown, or felt like we needed to have one of the people introducing her be somebody from the community. The only community role seemed to me to be it was held at the Del Mar [Theater], so it was downtown. It was absolutely exclusively University-focused. So that feels different to me.

Bennett: Are there things that you would like to see changed on campus or in the community?



Chapkis: I'm an Urvashi Vaid groupie. I think her political analysis is right on target: that we, whether on campus or in the community, wherever we find ourselves, we need to be doing progressive politics that are very broad-based, that are about social justice as broadly understood as possible. Queer politics needs to be about peace and justice work, not about simply securing rights for those people whose sex partners are the same sex. I think UCSC actually has a sense of queer politics that is quite in line with that. It's this hotbed of radicalism still, in terms of feminism and queer politics. I would like to see UCSC become more connected to the off-campus community, to see more organized outreach to link up with downtown, and to make the University more of a resource to the people who live in the town. It's been my observation over the thirty years that I've been in Santa Cruz that the University is increasingly a threat to the community, rather than a resource for it. The combination of UCSC and Silicon Valley has priced almost everybody I know out of being able to live in this town, unless they bought a home in 1970, or can afford 540K for a two-bedroom house. It's going to continue to have that kind of negative impact on the community, so I think it needs to be equally active in trying to be a resource for people. And it's not that, in my estimation.

Bennett: If you were to imagine someone reading this in seventy years, what would you want them to know about your time as a student here?

Chapkis: I can't think of a better place to have gone to school as an undergraduate, or as a graduate student. With my interests, my personality, it was a glorious match. I fear that UCSC is rapidly undoing many of the elements that made it the kind of place that I was really glad to be as an undergraduate and a graduate student. The institution of grades and the incredible pressure on junior faculty to produce and be super scholars, [has been] at the expense of doing small seminar classes, and having lots of direct contact with students. When I taught 120 people in that *Queer Politics* class, I had never taken a class at UCSC that was bigger than twenty or twenty-five students. This was just a shock to me, that those kinds of classes even existed. There are more and more classes now that are lecture classes, and graduate students are expected to do all of the actual teaching in the seminar sections.

I think what I would like people to know is that there was a moment before that, when faculty actually lived on campus, [when] core course teachers and preceptors were senior faculty. There was a different model of education that wasn't about grades. It was a time when the political climate created constant links between what you were doing in the classroom, the theory you were learning, and what you were living. There was a



tremendous excitement around sexual politics, gender politics, race politics, class politics and international justice. That is still here but it is threatened by the increasing professionalization of UCSC, mainstreaming it as an institution.