

# UC Santa Cruz

## Out in the Redwoods

### Title

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

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## CARTER WILSON

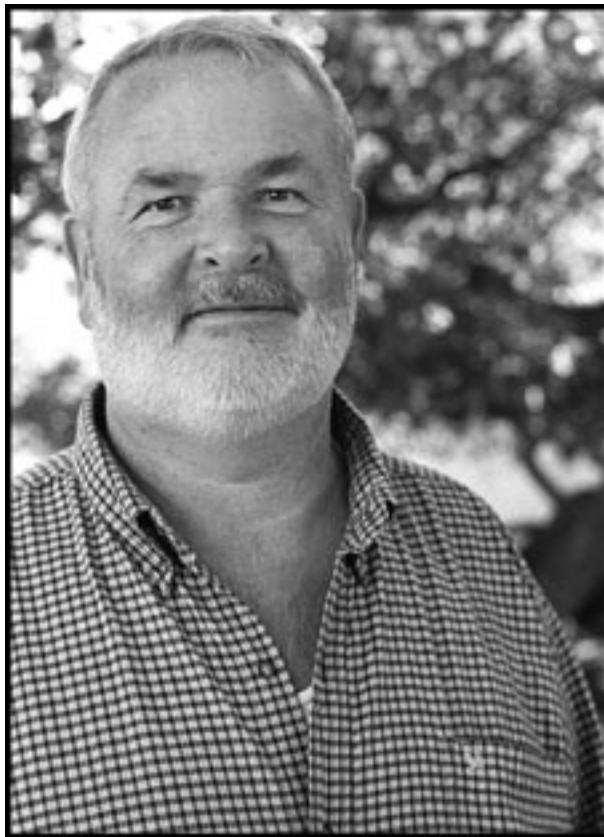


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**Interviewer, Andrea Lowgren:** *Carter Wilson was interviewed on the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2002, in his home in Aptos, California. He was a professor of community studies at UCSC from 1972 to 2002.*

**Lowgren:** Could you start by telling me a little bit about your early life and family background?



**Wilson:** I come from Washington, D.C. My family was mostly lawyers. My father worked in the federal government and my mother worked in the jewelry business. She sold Jackie Kennedy the spoons she gave Ethel for her wedding, or she sold Ethel the spoons she gave Jackie, I can't remember. One of those things. Both sides of my family are from the South. My father's family is from North Carolina, and my mother's family is from Georgia and Virginia and the Catholic counties in southern Maryland. I have a younger brother.

My dad died when I was seven and my brother was three. Our mother kind of went round the bend, first alcohol and then mental institutions, from which she never really finally recovered. She lived to be about sixty, but she was in and out of care from the time I was eight years old. The first time she collapsed after my father died, I was sent to live in Chicago. I lived with my aunt and uncle in Chicago for a couple years. Then I came back, and my brother and I were reunited, living in the household of our paternal grandmother. My father's mother and his older sister, who raised us, became an alternative family.

I went to the Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. , and then I went to Harvard and graduated there in 1963. I majored in English history and literature, and I seem, as far as I can remember, to have spent my entire time doing shows. I wrote the Hasty Pudding show for two years, which is the drag show that is put on at Harvard every year by a club. That's the one that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was in, where Jack Lemmon learned to do drag.

**Lowgren:** So were these drag shows, queer drag shows?

**Wilson:** Oh, no no. They were very... I guess to this day, *are* in a way very hetero-oriented. What they are are undergraduate-humor style, full-scale musical comedies. I think that at one point in the late-1940s they may have been directed by Jerome Robbins, the guy who directed *Gypsy* and *West Side Story* and things like that. Eric Segal, who wrote *Love Story*, wrote one of them. It's an opportunity for—we called them preppy guys—to, I guess act out all of their basic hostility towards women. [laughter] That's not really entirely true, but it was the rule of those shows, at least in my day, that you cast the male parts for odd-looking and often smaller guys, and you cast football players, hockey players, and guys with hairy legs in all of the major female parts. So there was always a joke on stage. If you ever have any supposedly heterosexual romance, clearly the female type towers over the male type. Ours were political. My first one was called *Peace Deco-*



*rum* and it was about the Peace Corps, which was brand-new right then. Wimpy little guys from the Peace Corps go to an island of sex-starved women. The second one made fun of conservative politics in America. It was the era of *The Manchurian Candidate*, so we had a conservative garden club that was against the appearance of a Russian ballet troupe in the town. That kind of thing. I'd known since I was in sixth or seventh grade that I wanted to be a writer. I originally thought that I wanted to be a writer for musical comedy. I was writing fiction at the time too, but that experience taught me musical comedy is certainly a group experience, and if you are writing the story or what's called the "book," your prestige value in the enterprise is very low. In fact, technically in the theater they "read the lights down" during the recitation of the book, and read the lights up when the musical numbers begin, which means that even in the professional musical theater you don't have a chance. They are always going to say that the musical numbers were brilliant and the book leaves much to be desired. That's what I learned from that experience.

Then I went to Mexico, where I had a big experience working with Mayan Indians. Harvard had a project with several other universities, where they took undergraduates, or recently graduated people, and gave them field training in anthropology. This was very important to me. I went to Chiapas, Mexico and ended up writing my first novel about that place, and still go back there. I just came back from there two weeks ago. I was supposed to go the University of Chicago to graduate school in history and work with Hanna Gray, who later became the president of Yale, but instead I wimped out and worked for several years in anthropology as a field worker, sort of without credentials. I had been doing British history, but could have gone to graduate school in anthropology. I published my first novel. I was a graduate student at Syracuse and got a writing job at Stanford. Then I suddenly had a way of staying employed. I taught at Stanford for a year, then came back and taught at Harvard for three years, and taught at Tufts University outside Boston for three years. And published a bunch, right from the beginning. I published my first novel in 1966, the second one in 1967, a book of children's stories in 1969, and my third novel in 1972.

I should say something also about my sexual social development. I had a lot of queer play, starting with when I was four years old. My first sex buddy was a guy named Tony Hiss, whose father was Alger Hiss, the man accused of being a Communist. Tony and I were in the same preschool. Sex play here means we did things like jump out of line when we were all getting ready to go to the bathroom, and through open doors watched



the other little boys and girls pee. I call it sex play because we knew it was bad. It was bad at least. We were bad. And then a lot of stuff with kids in my neighborhood, boys almost entirely. And when I lived in Chicago, with other little boys. When I was in about fifth grade, the other little boys began to withdraw from that kind of play, and I knew that I still liked it. There was an incident when I was living in Chicago with my uncle and aunt, and this is kind of funny. My uncle had grown up in show business and had a very ambivalent relation to it. His father was an actor; his mother was an actress. They had met when they were playing *Romeo and Juliet* together.

**Lowgren:** How ironic.

**Wilson:** Yes. He sent for her; he picked her picture out of an agents' book in New York. A seventeen-year-old Irish colleen. My uncle was in advertising and connected in show business, but he always spoke badly of it. I was fairly disturbed at that point. My childhood had not been easy, with my dad dying and my mother going away. I had this crying fit and clearly wanted to tell them something. He came to find out what in the hell all this was about. I told him this dirty little secret of mine, which was that I wanted to be a theatrical scenery designer. He told me that was a completely honorable profession. But I would say as an eight or nine year old I was speaking in a certain kind of code, because I had a sense that people who did that were queer. I was trying to tell him that I was not going to be a fireman. [laughter] He didn't want me to do that either. I guess the real clue for me was when I was twelve years old. I knew that other guys were doing something by themselves under the sheets at night. I asked my friends about it, and they basically told me how to masturbate. Once I began to have masturbation fantasies, they were all about other guys in the locker room.

In the 1950s, the casual wisdom was that if you were queer you would have a life, but it would be a miserable, unhappy life. That was reinforced all over the map. When I was in high school, I went to a lot of professional theater and watched the plays trying out for New York, and plays that had been in New York, gotten a little shop-worn, and had gone on the road. So I saw a version of the original production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. And if you look at someone like Williams, whom I was very excited by, the message is that homosexuality exists, and even in that play—is okay, but that it makes a mess of the lives of women who are attached to [homosexuals]. Blanche Dubois has had a bad marriage to a guy who turned out to be gay. How did she get to be a dipsomaniac, nymphomaniacal schizophrenic? Well that's given as the reason. The relationship between Biff and Maggy



in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is poisoned by the fact that he's still in love with his [college roommate]. Others suffer from your homosexuality, is a main message in Williams.

In my family I had a great uncle by marriage who was an artist. It is now pretty clear to me that the circle of friends he grew up with were all gay. They were antique dealers and furniture restorers and artists, and they "never married," as we said in my family. I think it was all around me, but it was always portrayed as a scary, bad thing. In college, I actually wrote a piece about this. Harvard had a national reputation for being a pansy school. Articles appeared in *U.S. Confidential*, "Is Harvard's Crimson Really Lavender?" This is the 1960s. It was part of the Commie, pinko, queero smear stuff. Sexuality was very under wraps. I would be hard-pressed to name people whom I knew who were homosexual when I was in college.

After college, I had a heterosexual life. I had girlfriends, some of whom are still my very good friends. When I started teaching, I figured that psychoanalysis was a possibility for... My presenting symptom, as they say, for going into psychoanalysis was to shut off my homosexuality. I had what I think was a very successful classical analysis of four years, lying on the couch. The analyst, whom I thought at the time was homophobic, did a very wonderful job. He must have understood that my presenting symptom was not the real symptom. The real problem was that I had worked myself into a corner where I had trouble getting to intimacy with my partners, because in fact I really wanted other partners. The year I was teaching in Stanford was kind of a hoot. I discovered a woman I had known as an undergraduate, a poet. We started what was actually a pretty hot affair. It made me feel wonderful about myself and caused me to start to go back to swimming, which is my usual form of exercise. Then I was faced with this awful dilemma because at swimming I saw in the locker room all these naked guys' bodies and there I am having sex with Anne in the night with my fantasies. So I had a kind of notion that if I could concentrate on heterosexuality, just keep my mind on it, you know. It was an instance when it was clear to me that keeping my mind on it was coming back and biting me in the tail.

So, I tried psychoanalysis. It was successful in other ways, but it didn't relieve me of that symptom. So when I came to Santa Cruz, I was thirty and I had—what's the best word to say it? I hadn't given up. The song is "I'm through with love." I wasn't through with love, but I had figured, well if I can't come out (which I seemed to be unable to do), if I can't come out, then a certain kind of pleasant—and this had a spiritual element to it—a certain kind of pleasant non-involvement is my path. Something monkish, not hard-core celibate. I was not on the sexual market at all when I came to Santa Cruz. Now one of the



things that happened was that gay life in San Francisco was exploding at that time, and so you read quite openly user-friendly articles in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about going to, if not the gay bathhouses, at least to the mixed bisexual baths like the Sutro. People I knew, graduate students I knew, were admitting their bisexuality.

**Lowgren:** Was bisexuality a code for homosexuality?

**Wilson:** At least for the people I'm thinking of, bisexuality was a code for bisexuality. [laughter] But I do remember there was a guy who was in sociology, who later left and became a therapist in San Francisco.

**Lowgren:** Alan Sable?

**Wilson:** Sable, right. But he was not out, at least in 1972-73 in Santa Cruz. I remember one time at a party him saying, or us agreeing, that we would like to get to know each other better, or something like that. Then he said to me—talk about code—he said something about, “Well, maybe if I really knew about him, I wouldn't like him so much.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Well, because of what I do when I go away to San Francisco on the weekends.” When I thought that conversation over I thought, well, what's his secret? His secret is probably that he's gay.

**Lowgren:** How did you end up coming to UC Santa Cruz?

**Wilson:** I was friends with a woman named Janice Perleman who was an assistant professor of politics and community studies at UCSC. In the spring of 1972, community studies was ready to branch out and have someone who would handle the arts, journalistic writing, nonfiction writing, fiction writing. That was what I was hired to do. I came to Santa Cruz with some trepidation. I had become a ladder faculty member at Tufts, and they were sort of dangling tenure in front of my face. I hadn't been planning any of this. It was really an academic career sort of by default. So I took the Santa Cruz offer. It was way late. Santa Cruz was not yet completely buttoned down. It was six or seven years old. And among other things, people were hiring way at the end of the year for jobs that began July 1. I remember that I was interviewed in the last week in May, and went back to Tufts, where they were already having graduation, to tell them that I had another offer, and why didn't they make a comparable one. In other words, why didn't they offer me tenure at that point? They said “Oh no.” So I came to Santa Cruz, where I had actually very good prospects. I had taught a year at Stanford. I was anxious about the move



to California, to a new place. I had this positive feeling about my previous work with social scientists, who'd always been extremely nice to me. They knew who I was and what my qualities were, and didn't try to force me to be an anthropologist. I was hired by Bill Friedland mainly, and Michael Cowan, who was the chair of community studies. I came here on July 1, 1972, and I have been in Santa Cruz for thirty years. I started as an Assistant Professor III and now I'm a Professor VI, and I'm going to retire in June.

Four years after I came to Santa Cruz, I got the opportunity to work in another anthropology project in Cuzco, Peru. There was an assistant in that project who was a lower-class... We were working either in, or at the edges of the Quechua language, and the project employed a man almost precisely my age who had been raised in the lower classes, and because of that spoke Quechua. I got there, and immediately fell head-over-heels in love with him. He was responsive up to a certain point. He would be very romantic with me. When I would touch him, he would sort of go—*no no no*—unless he was drunk and then he would sort of... So it was this huge, really life-changing flirtation because I was in love with him, and he seemed in some way to be in love with me. He came to the States a couple of times. By that point, it's interesting how I was with close friends... I came out to them at that point about him, told them I was in love with Ernesto. He was around UCSC with me sometimes and it was really impossible. There was a lot of drinking involved. There was a lot of—*yes yes, no no*. I am pretty sure he had a lot of affection for me, but he was not. He told me one time that he had had one relationship with another man, but I really think that it was not his path at all. So it was very painful for me.

In the middle of that, my mother committed suicide, and died. I felt awful about her, but I had just figured out that I had lost Ernesto, and I felt *more* awful about that. I had the problem of [not wanting] my friends to be confused about what my grief was about. I let my close friends know it was really about him. I had two griefs going on at the same time. It was hard to divorce them at all. The important thing about that was that I think that Ernesto let me know that this monkish existence was not going to work out, and I had to do something for myself in terms of coming out.

What I did first, was I located gay bars on Polk Street in San Francisco. I went to the front door of one, parked my car across the street, sat shivering in my car for about a half an hour, and then drove back to Santa Cruz. I couldn't bring myself to go in. Friends began to try to fix me up a little bit. That was an interesting part of that experiment, too, because I realized that I was so anxious about it, that things that other people would con-





sider perfectly normal and not meaningful at all, I was actually scared of doing. There was a fellow named Richard Smith, a wonderful guy who's now dead, who was a graduate student in history of consciousness. Richard had been a classmate of mine at Harvard, and had dropped out, but I hadn't known him then. I knew that he was gay. He was kind of out. In fact, I now realize that Richard would have at least had sex with me, whether he cared about me or not, but I missed the cues. The part I am getting at, is that going to the Acapulco with him for dinner was like walking on hot coals for me. Somebody would see us. Somebody would recognize at least what was going on in me. I did, however, and I'm very proud of this, set myself a little goal, which was do something to feed my gay self every day. If that meant flirting with somebody a little bit, somebody that I thought might flirt back... I went to visit some friends in New Haven, and there was a guy who I didn't get to see again after one evening—we were with other friends—but then I got his telephone number and called him and that was the one for that day.

That fall of 1977, a friend of mine who was in politics encouraged me to get to know David Thomas, because she knew that David was gay. I guess that David was still in the closet, but she knew his circumstances. He was living with this Chicano guy, had a house full of people, friends of different sexual persuasions. I did befriend David. He was easy to befriend. At Halloween in 1977, I was invited to a party at David's house, which happened to be a house I had lived in when I first came to Santa Cruz, before David had it. It was a costume party, and I knew there would be gay people there.

I was so anxious. I was the cat on the hot tin roof, you know. I couldn't figure out a costume at that point. [laughter] I went as Freud's idea of the return of the repressed. A concept costume. The way I did that, was I put on my nicest suit, which I knew I looked okay in, and then I had things like babies' rattles and teething rings and different kinds of symbols of the past returned. Nobody got it at all. But it didn't matter. It got me to the party. And for a while I was really convinced I was not going to be able to get there. And to make a long story short... Oh, ha ha, I had forgotten this part of it. I was all set to go home. I had made a date; I had progressed very quickly with Byron Wheeler. Byron was an assistant professor of dance, and for a long time now he has been Michael Cowan's lover. He didn't get tenure, but he works in the Education Abroad Program. Byron, whom I had known for a long time, suddenly spots me and we are all set to go home, but he has an old boyfriend there he needs to prove some things to, so he's dancing up a storm with everybody, and while that happens I meet David Thomas's lover in the kitchen and the first thing he does, very drunk, is come on to me. And off we go to his



room. So there in David Thomas's house are me and Ray Martinez, who became my lover for twenty-two years. It's a very romantic story, and what's funny was that there were a lot of people around. Basically it happened as close to in public as... I mean, "Where's Ray? Where's Carter?" right in the midst of all this other interesting stuff that was going on in the same party.

Anyway, Ray and I began an affair. He moved out on David the following week and suddenly he and I were living together. I had just bought this house. I lived in an apartment down the street. We lived there for a couple of weeks, and then we moved in here, and basically we started a life which ran in one form or another for twenty-two years—in this house with no furniture. Imagine, this place had no furniture at all. We were in the beginning ecstatically happy together, and it was always a wild ride. I'm a Capricorn, supposedly calm and well organized, and Ray was a Scorpio, and they are interested in only two things: sex and death.

I was thirty-five, and I came right straight out of the closet. Ray and David had been sort of closeted, and Ray had turned against it. Some of his anti-David stories to me were about the big lie. So he really came out at the same time. My own brother was the last person I really told, and other members of my family behind that. It took six months or so. But at the University... It was very interesting, because I went right straight down through my close friends, to my friends, to my associates, to... Then you realize there are some people with whom you're not sharing very much at all, and there's no particular need to tell them. Let them hear it from the morning news, or wherever. But as I always tell students, under that impetus it was really easy for me to come out. I often think about that. I think it's great when people come out in the abstract. In other words, I've never had sex with anybody, but now I'm gay. That's great. But it's a lot easier when you actually have the relationship in hand. It was also tremendously easy in that era too, because everything was exploding all around us. I remember finding myself thinking one day, Oh, I wish I had lived in a revolutionary era. Then I thought of San Francisco in the late-1970s and I thought, oh I did. I really did. I don't think that's romanticizing it. I think that's what was going on.

**Lowgren:** What was revolutionary about it?

**Wilson:** On the guys' side at least. I don't know whether there's ever been, in world history, an experiment in guys having as much sex as they can stand. And that was what was going on. I mean, people were having as much sex as they wanted, and some more,



maybe. And men and women were also trying to develop a community with a whole alternative set of institutions. After a couple of years with Ray, I wrote a gay novel. It was my coming-out novel about a guy falling in love with a guy in Peru. I was on Randy Alfred's gay radio show in San Francisco. I had a booksigning at the Walt Whitman Bookshop. These were not things I asked for. The culture editor of *The Advocate* liked the book, and sent a guy to Santa Cruz to interview me. My response in New York was unfortunately not so good, because it seemed as though I was a threat to some existing literary figures. So I got kind of roasted in New York. But on the West Coast, it was a celebratory moment. People were celebrating themselves. If you were the one lesbian dancer you would go right to the head of the list. People were supportive in that way. I know that younger people sometimes resent people talking too much about that stuff, because they didn't experience it, or because AIDS put a frost on it. I'm actually thinking of a guy who was a student of mine, who is a writer in San Francisco now, and he always points out to me that that scene—the way it was in the late-1970s—doesn't exist any more. I guess that's probably true.

**Lowgren:** How was your coming out process received at UCSC? Was it generally positive?

**Wilson:** It was generally positive. The negatives, or the back biting, I didn't hear about. If there was negative press about my coming out, I didn't know it.

**Lowgren:** Did you already have tenure at this point?

**Wilson:** I had tenure. I always point out to my students that I was thirty-five years old. I was in the housing market, and had tenure at the University of California. So when they say, "That was so courageous," I say, "Well no, not necessarily. I was kind of set up at that point."

**Lowgren:** When did you start coming out to your students?

**Wilson:** In the first couple of years of being out to other people. There was a startling moment. There was a guy you may hear about, or whom I hope is in the project, named Gary Reynolds, who was a gay activist who had AIDS, and he became an AIDS activist too. He cut a swath through school, up until the 1990s, when he died. Gary was in a beginning class of mine in community studies. I remember the moment, and others remember it too, because they said it was the most startling thing that happened in their



undergraduate careers. I was talking about in-group speech and out-group speech. I said, "Now I'm going to use some words you wouldn't ordinarily hear from me, and I want you to realize they are all in scare quotes. For example, black people sometimes say that the use of 'nigger,' in understood conditions, is a term of endearment, and in fact it overrides the oppressiveness attached to that term." At which point, an older black student of mine got up and basically testified about that. Her youngest son was always known as 'nigger' in the family, and that was because they loved him so much. Then I remember Gary suddenly bringing up not 'gay,' but 'queer,' how 'queer' was a positive word among gay people, and how even 'bitch' used by one man about another man could be, with the right spin on it, a kind of positive recognition. When you're on the podium you are already sweating bullets anyway, and you don't know quite what's going to happen next. But I couldn't miss the opportunity. So I came right straight out to that class. A friend of mine, Hazel Hull, said, "I was sitting there, Carter, and I already knew you pretty well. I was sitting there in the back of the room. And my mouth dropped open and my pencil dropped."

So that stuff was initially very powerful. One of my colleagues, whose anonymity I will preserve, told me that when he was fifteen and in high school, he had had a full-scale love affair with another guy, and that he still loved that guy. Now he was married with four children. That was his way of telling me that he... That nearly brought me to tears. I came out to him and then he came out to me.

One time I was made (this was a little bit later on), a little bit nervous. I was head of the wonderfully named Committee on Committees. It's the only elected committee in the Academic Senate. They have these big elections. And basically, the members of the Committee on Committees get other people to staff the senate's committee. So in some ways, the chair of the Committee on Committees is the key elected post in the Academic Senate. It's not as powerful as being president of the senate or something. But there I was, and there was some change in legislation in the senate that had to do with sexual orientation and with gender discrimination. It was not properly written, because it didn't really say "gay or lesbian," or "minority sexuality." But I had to present it, and I was extremely anxious about doing that. In fact, I got what you would call some backbench guff from some of the scientists. It took the form of, "Well, if the legislation already covers men and women, Carter, why did you need to add this new language? What else have you got!" It was hostile, but now that I think about it, it was mainly to make me squirm. The following day, I saw the senate's secretary, who took all the notes. She was a



good friend of mine. I said, “How did I do yesterday?” She said, “Oh Carter, you were outrageous!” And I thought... There had been a movie called *Outrageous*. It features a drag queen named Craig Russell. I thought, well, would she have said that to... Of course she was my friend so I didn’t really take it badly. But I was thinking, that’s an odd word. That’s code for us, for *campy, queer*.

Then I wrote the narration for *The Times of Harvey Milk* and the narration for *Common Threads*, which are my easily identifiable writing credits. The University certainly likes that kind of association with an Academy Award-winning project. So in a way I think I was covered by that, too.

**Lowgren:** When did you start teaching courses that had gay content?

**Wilson:** I teach a lot of service courses in community studies: *Preparation for Field Study*, *Return from Field Study*. So there is not always an opportunity to craft a syllabus that’s entirely... But I started putting gay and lesbian material in right away. I think it was the early-1990s before I started teaching actual gay-content courses. Nancy Stoller and I developed a course called *Gay Social Worlds*. I used to call it “Gay Social Whirls.” It was a lower-division class. I taught it once, and I didn’t do a good job, and I didn’t like the class, either. It felt to me like people just picking up a general education requirement. There was an odd mixture of people with a lot of sophistication in gay and lesbian studies who wanted more from a lower-division class, and then sort of liberal shoppers thinking, “I’ve done a black class and a Chicano class. I guess I’ll pick up a...” So I didn’t enjoy doing that one.

I have a course called *Queer Social Visionaries* that I first taught in community studies, and then in American studies, and it actually meets requirements for women’s studies. There are two things about it. If I weren’t going to retire, I would teach that class again. I feature gay male writers whom I think no one else really deals with in the same way. Burroughs, James Baldwin, Tennessee Williams, Walt Whitman. [We also read] Adrienne Rich. Queer social visionaries. The students don’t understand why it’s not right straight down the line fifty-fifty gay and lesbian. I tell them, “Well, there are some things that I feel I know about, and that aren’t otherwise being taught here. I don’t have particular insights into Rita Mae Brown, although I think she must be a queer social visionary, too.”

The other thing about that class was a real hoot. There were questions asked when it went through the Committee on Educational Policy. This would be 1996 or so, so late.



The objection by one member, Bruce Bridgman of psychology, was, “A course with that title? What if the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* got ahold of it? They would make a laughing stock of the University.” My response was, “Of course, if you are using the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* as your standard.” Do you know who Ellen Farmer was? Ellen Farmer was the academic editor, which meant she mounted the catalog every year. By now, Ellen Farmer is an out-and-about lesbian. She asked me more-or-less as a personal favor, to deal with my colleague who had these doubts. I had a series of email exchanges with him where he read me the definitions in *Webster’s*, which didn’t include a positive definition of queer. It eventually got to be fairly aggravating. Why am I spending all this time defending this? Luckily then Ellen, or somebody in humanities, noticed that there was *Queering the Renaissance*; in the humanities there was queer this and queer that, right? And I’m sure Teresa de Lauretis must have had queer in some of the titles of her classes. So it became a moot point immediately.

[While] trying to do some courses through Summer Session, we ran into a little bit of trouble, because I sponsored a course with Susie Bright, who had been my student. Summer Session got very anxious because Susie was having people write erotica, and some of them were underage. High school students can take those classes. So the theoretical [problem] was that Mom would say, “What did you do in summer school at Santa Cruz,” and junior would show her this cocksucking, ass-eating story, whatever it was [laughter], and then UCSC would have been perverting a minor. We got through that one, but Susie then backed off. If they are going to have that kind of concern, then we can do our kinds of things elsewhere.

**Lowgren:** How do you feel about the viability of queer studies as a major or discipline?

**Wilson:** Well, I’m pretty convinced that there is enough point of view to make a queer studies undergraduate major, and to make a queer studies graduate program. Partially because it cuts across disciplines. Partially because it’s not exactly gender studies. Gender studies is a code word for women’s studies, and I feel that in a way it’s kind of like loading up a bill in the U.S. Senate where the salmon interests are connected to the school bill. Women’s studies has been a good home to some queer studies, but I don’t feel that it should be treated in that way. [Frank J.] Talamantes, who is the dean of graduate education, and some others have been looking into a sexuality studies graduate major at UC Santa Cruz. It might be a working group rather than a department. And hopefully... Frank says he’s got some scientists up his sleeve. He’s an endocrinologist. But he hasn’t actually identified any scientists yet. Even though I’m retiring, one of the



reasons I've stayed with it is because I notice that it's mainly a lesbian presence on the committee. One of the things I think that is clear about Santa Cruz is that the lesbian position is better represented than the gay male position, at least in terms of official... The lesbians are all out and the gay men are not necessarily.

**Lowgren:** Why do you think that is?

**Wilson:** I actually think that that's where the homophobia of UC Santa Cruz appears. Lesbians, as we all know, don't actually have sex. They are kind of a social group. [laughter] You know this is all in quotes, right? You know that I'm making fun?

**Lowgren:** Yes.

**Wilson:** There was an exhibit in the library and there were all kinds of photographs of lesbian couples. Marge Frantz and her lover. Gay men were represented as solitary individuals. I think this is still... I think that for people who believe that men have too much power, gay men are still men. So there's no particular reason to want to try to weight the scales in their favor. At least in terms of the faculty, lesbian women are very well organized on our campus. The sciences are a completely separate matter. The sciences are still weighted with a kind of 1950s mentality about the nature of the business. I'm actually surprised and pleased at the number of women who have managed to cling on in the sciences at UCSC. I don't know whether you know the work of a woman named Sharon Traweck. She got her Ph.D. at UC Santa Cruz, and is a historian of science. Her first stuff was about the linear accelerator at Stanford. And Sharon says the culture of nuclear physics is a culture of the 1950s. When she worked there they used to pat her on the head. I would never pat Sharon Traweck on the head.

Sharon said that women in nuclear physics proceed to a certain point, and then get to a plateau in their thirties. The next stage is to become a group leader, and to get time on these expensive neutron powering machines. And strangely enough, they don't. The gay men drop out a few years before the women do, because the sexism seems overcomeable. But the men have already begun to feel uncomfortable in the kind of Saturday night barbecue atmosphere. Now I have friends in the sciences at UCSC whom I think are themselves in no way homophobic, or even misogynistic. But the culture of science is convinced that science has no culture, that it's completely rational, and that if you are as good as you are, you are as good as you are.



And it's just by chance that that fourth person who worked on the DNA never got her Nobel Prize. Right? She did the grunt work. It's a good example. I think something like that is operating. There was a guy here in mathematics who was married, and who at one point announced his bisexuality. But nobody ever then picked that up, or ran with it. He was kind of considered an oddball anyway, and I think people just... It was the kind of information that you just changed the subject about.

I think there was a gay botanist who was a lecturer. He got along okay. He was out. He was a lecturer, not a ladder faculty member. I think you could draw a map of relative warmth towards gays and lesbians in the University. I think you're kind of lucky in that. Despite all those old white males in history, there's a good percentage of women, and openness among the younger people about sexuality. As far as I can remember, I am the senior gay man both in age and rank in the social sciences. David Thomas retired. And I don't know who else, other than my friend Lionel Cantú, names don't immediately come to mind of gay men in the social sciences.<sup>8</sup>

**Lowgren:** Do you feel like your community includes staff members or people from the Santa Cruz community?

**Wilson:** My community? My personal community? Sure, absolutely. In fact, one of the things that I like about my life, particularly since my life at the University is now going to end, is that I have a bunch of rich friendships here with gay and lesbian people in Santa Cruz, and with staff members. That's one thing that there's not been any trouble for gay men to get in, particularly in the lower levels of staff positions. To rise to the top, I'm not sure. There are thirty departments. Each of them has a well-paid departmental secretary. All thirty of them are women, and I'm not sure that any of them is a lesbian, that I know of. People tend to look at the faculty. They tend not to look at some of these other things. Gay men have been provosts of colleges, and our partners have served as Señor Provost, or whatever you want to call it, for nothing, for free. That part seems relatively cool. I don't know of any objections. Bill Ladusaw, the linguist who is provost of Cowell, is completely out of the closet, and there's no backlash. He's been a good provost, as far as I can tell. Michael Cowan was only partly out when he and Byron [Wheeler] ran Merrill. Ray used to think that we should have one of those jobs. He said,

<sup>8</sup>Lionel Cantú was an assistant professor of sociology at UCSC; his fields were international migration, HIV/AIDS, Latino/a studies, feminist studies, and queer theory. He died unexpectedly on May 26, 2002 at the age of thirty-six. He was a great inspiration to many in the campus community.





“Entertainment budget. Big house. Free catering.” I said, “Yes, but for me a lot of time and disciplinary stuff.” I always kind of avoided that.

**Lowgren:** You said that your personal community involves a lot of people here in Santa Cruz. When did that shift from being San Francisco-focused, to being Santa Cruz-focused?

**Wilson:** In the early- to middle-1980s. By the middle-1980s, for sure. Ray was one of the founding members of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project, and some of the first meetings took place in this room. Then I got seriously involved in the early-1990s in a somewhat quixotic effort which was really fun. It started with some busts at a place that they call Vista Point, but that’s not its name, that’s its designation, down on the road to Watsonville. On two weekends, the sheriff busted fourteen guys and one heterosexual couple who were having sex in the bushes behind Vista Point. And they brought along visual media, television journalists, but they didn’t bring any print journalists. They were setting guys up in the woods, cops stroking their crotches and stuff like that. I got involved. It was clear to me that it was scandalous for the cops to be doing that in the 1990s, that there were plenty of other things that they could spend their time on. Also, the Santa Cruz AIDS Project had that area covered. People were using it for bush outreach. Whatever you think of recreational sex in outdoor places, it was clearly a place where pamphlets were being handed out, and education was happening for people who were otherwise unreachable—that’s mostly bisexual guys and people who don’t go to gay bars. Anyway, long story, but Ray and I became pretty active in that one, too. I fell in with a bunch of younger gay and lesbian lawyers who really pushed me along. They kept wanting me to do more and more stuff. We confronted the sheriff. We were in the paper all the time. I think we actually succeeded in getting the sheriff’s office to understand that their busts were not a cool form of activity for the 1990s, and in letting the public understand at least what the issues were.

One of the positive effects of the AIDS epidemic was that it allowed people to reconsider what sex education was going to be about, and in some places for gay and lesbian people to get in on that, to get their message in the mix too. I was around the whole period of ACT UP, and Queer Nation. It was a brief, glorious little moment. I remember that same fall. I guess it was considered illegal to hold hands, or for same-sex people to kiss at the Capitola Mall.

**Lowgren:** What time period was this?



**Wilson:** 1991.

**Lowgren:** Oh my.

**Wilson:** Anyway, we had a kiss-in. I remember kissing city council members Mardi Wormhoudt and Michael Rotkin both on the lips. There was a lot of straight support for all that stuff. It seemed, in the midst of AIDS and everything, a very good moment, which has more or less passed. You don't think of street action and those things anymore.

**Lowgren:** Not around AIDS issues. I see the anti-globalization movement heading in that direction.

**Wilson:** That's right. But not around sexuality.

**Lowgren:** How did the AIDS crisis affect UCSC, or has it?

**Wilson:** Well, I guess the main thing was the founding and continuance of AIDS education efforts, which has been startlingly good at UC Santa Cruz. It got off to a weak start, and then we've had two or three wonderful people running the program. The Condom Co-op and those things now are in the UCSC system. I happen to know a lot about it, because I was actually the chancellor's representative to all of those groups for a long time. My partner was HIV-positive and I made it my business to be involved in that issue on campus. I don't know where that stands now. At one point, in terms of public service or community service, AIDS work was the most popular thing that UC Santa Cruz students did. You're a historian. If you were to go and try to write a history of AIDS in the state of California, and AIDS efforts in the state of California, you would find that some of the biggest movers and shakers, particularly in the Latino community, began as UCSC undergraduates. I could pick out ten people now working in statewide stuff who came out of UC Santa Cruz, and given that it is one of the smaller campuses...

**Lowgren:** Did they come out of the community studies program?

**Wilson:** Some of them came out of community studies, American studies. Oh, that's the other thing. UCSC students started both the Needle Exchange Program in Santa Cruz County and the Needle Exchange in Monterey County. A lot of that did come out of community studies. I was really pleased. Knowing that I had an interest in AIDS, they came to me. So I was adviser for all of those people.



**Lowgren:** How have you seen your students change over the years?

**Wilson:** That's very complicated, because as you get older you are supposed to become more crotchety, and everything is supposed to seem awful. You can never tell how much that has to do with your own entropy, and how much it's really true. [laughter] When I came to Santa Cruz, UCSC was the hardest campus to get into, and a lot of the students were just dazzling. Either they had classy public school educations in California—I tend to think that good public education in California is better than good private education in California—or, they came out of movements. I had a lot of students who came out of the grape workers union [the UFW], or out of the anti-war movement. If they didn't have a fabulous prior education, they had enormous purpose. I had been teaching at Stanford, Harvard, and Tufts. I thought my UCSC students were as good as anybody I had taught before, and a lot easier to teach in many cases, because a lot of Harvard kids are really there spending Dad's money while they wait to spend Dad's real money. It was sometimes really hard to motivate them there.

Now UCSC's grown. It's no longer as popular as it was. We had a guy who upped enrollments for awhile, named Richard Moll. He was head of admissions and then he moved on. He was the first one to get us on the list of party schools, or something like that. Now to me, the idea that people go to UCSC to party, I still find that very surprising, and even hard to try and reflect in my teaching. I tend to expect that my students are all going to be really serious. Of course they also have fun, but they're serious about fun, for example. Seriousness is still there, but it's not as uniform or as broad as it was. That's my feeling. The other thing is, UCSC started as very special. The whole non-grades thing... The faculty-student ratio for undergraduates was twelve-to-one when I came to Santa Cruz. Today it's twenty-eight or thirty-to-one. In terms of personalized attention, even if everybody did come with serious or serious/ fun goals, you just don't get as much attention as you did. I tend to think, actually, that attention rather than "teaching" is what develops people.

**Lowgren:** Do you see changes in the way that the queer students have been organizing since you've been here? Have you been involved very much in the student groups?

**Wilson:** I tend to try to be helpful where I can. Again, I always try to go to the events, especially at the beginning of the year. There were no queer student groups when I came, I'm pretty sure, and they are there now. The campus is bound to reflect the society. I believe there is homophobia in everyone, including homosexuals. But it doesn't seem to



me as though queer students need to hide their queerness anymore at all. In fact, it may help provide them with a sense of themselves, and a sense of their own destiny, of the importance of what it is that they are doing. I wish that there were more focal points. There's the gay and lesbian center. There's not a major. In the 1980s I felt really strongly that the non-support of gay men, at least, meant that we were losing them to the city. "I flunked that course," they think. "That guy doesn't like me. I'll go be a waiter and live in the city." So close. People have expressed this to me: "Why struggle with being gay in Santa Cruz? Lying to landlords, which (you still have to do, maybe), trying not to get beat up on the Pacific Garden Mall, when I could live on Castro and be happy, or be with my own?"

I guess I'm moving towards thinking that there should be not just a social organization, but actually an academic organization for gay people. There probably should be something like a queer studies major, or, there's another way to do that, which is that you can do it without money, just by having a committee rather than a department. Latin American studies limped along that way for years. Of course, then all of those committees want to become departments, because it is easier. I suppose I should win the lottery and leave some money to UC Santa Cruz. But it's not just a matter of throwing money at it. It's a matter of realizing that that's an interest.

One of the things that I think is unexplored, and maybe I'm wrong about this, is that people mouth the idea that gays and lesbians are a discriminated-against group. But there are no particular financial aid incentives. At least in the old days I met a lot of students who said that they were supporting themselves because they were at UCSC and discovered that they were gay and told their parents. And their parents said, "Well, I am not going to pay for you to go to that school." Should people in that situation get financial aid? That's a dicey issue, because it could be seen as taking finances away from the ethnic minorities, where the discrimination is on the basis of looks rather than on the basis of behavior. You can see all of the complications. But I still think it's something that should be paid attention to. I think we're in an okay moment, but we're in a slough, between big movements, between big moments.

**Lowgren:** I know that you do a lot of work about AIDS, especially in communities in Mexico. Have there been other ways that sexuality has influenced the research you have been doing?



**Wilson:** Well, what I say about the AIDS work in Mexico is that there is reason to hope that some day there won't be AIDS, but there's no reason to hope that there won't some day be homosexuality. So even though it's tilted towards AIDS, my broadest purpose is to understand gay people in that other culture. It is a professional interest of mine, but it's also a personal interest. The work gives me a great deal of pleasure. I worked in Mexico for a number of years being in the closet, and when you're in the closet you don't see a lot of things. Then you come out and you interpret things a whole lot differently. It's a hoot to me that mainstream Mexicans went for so many years thinking that there was no homosexuality in Mexico, or that Chicanos could even at the time of the beginning of the AIDS movement say, "Oh, don't give us any of that. That's gay stuff and we don't have them." But this is a culture that is as motivated by homosexuality as ours. Or there is more fear of it. Some people think that macho is really just a reaction to the fear. What's macho about? Well, it's a way of controlling women and a way of asserting that you're not queer. It's actually a reaction. That's one theory. Also, it's really fun to watch Mexico become more gay, for people to come a little bit more out.

I always try to dovetail that work with work with Indian communities. One of the things that was really exciting about this last trip to Mexico, was that I went to a fiesta in a town that I had never been to before, a Mayan Indian town. This fiesta was sort of their carnival, although they call it something different. It's just loaded with guys dressed up as women. And they are not trying to pass as women at all. They are ceremonial women. It's like that woman who saw J. Edgar Hoover in drag. "J. Edgar Hoover made one ugly woman," she said. Some of these guys do not make great women. [laughter] But what's being talked about, at least as far as I can understand it, is all about sexuality. Some of it is about the bisexual nature of men and women. One of these guys who is a dancing woman, sings a song that goes, "I am half-woman, half-man." We tend to think of that as being late-breaking philosophical news that comes out of the Western "advanced" cultures. Oh no. There is a sexual enactment that we watched where guys pretend to fuck one another. One group fucks the other group, and then the other group gets up and fucks them. Then the principal transvestite makes a speech. "And this is the way men and women ought to do it, too," he says. I'm not sure that he means that there should always be sexual reciprocity. But that's the *apparent* meaning of what he's saying. And that's presented to children. My notion would be that this guy should be put in charge of sex education, if not for Chiapas, maybe for Mexico, and maybe for the whole world. [laughter] Him in his dress and his beads.



**Lowgren:** That's great. Do you work with Mexican-American communities here in Santa Cruz?

**Wilson:** I have, yes. My Spanish is pretty good. And my partner was a Chicano, so I had access. He was a Chicano who didn't speak Spanish, so we were an audiovisual presentation. I spoke and he looked. [laughter]

**Lowgren:** Do you have any other stories or comments that you'd like to share?

**Wilson:** It was interesting to read back over this interview that I gave you from 1985, because I tell a story which is about me being accepted, UCSC and Santa Cruz being a good place for me to come out. But I think I need always to add that I remain very critical of the whole situation. And it seems to me that... Well, criticism/self-criticism first. I've failed in my career at UC Santa Cruz to do institution-building around issues of sexuality. Nancy Stoller has done more than I've done. Bettina [Aptheker], in her way, may have done more than I've done. I've not pushed it the way I could have, I suppose. Partially it's because the work of institution-building is a little dreary for me. I'm more of an *artiste* in that sense. I do think, though, that some of these things should be examined. One of the things that makes me leery about retiring is that it's thin for gay men at our campus, and gay male students think so, too. Two, three, four lesbian members of the counseling staff, one straight guy who does a workshop for men who are questioning. [I'm not saying] the lesbian community is a "bad" community for being well organized. But if I could write the job description for my replacement, I would think that it shouldn't just be one big fat writer, but rather a gay man. Part of what I am at UCSC is a gay man. In fact, I think I've probably become a bad role model for gay men at UCSC.

**Lowgren:** Why do you say that?

**Wilson:** Well, I don't always get along with gay male students. I tend to be tough on them, where maybe I should be just entirely accepting of whatever it is they want. I think somebody like Danny Scheie may be a better role model in that way. He's in the theater arts department. He directs a lot of shows around the Bay Area. I don't want to use the word *flamboyant*, but Danny's right out there. A different style than my style. I think that Danny exhibits a gay self to the world that... I mean, mine's okay, but I think that he exhibits one that is more exemplary. If I had a future at UCSC, those would be the things I would look at.