

Carla Williams
Interview by Lindsey Peregoff
Lesbian Photography Project
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(Side 1)

LINDSEY PEREGOFF: We'll start with the basics here. Where did you grow up?

CARLA WILLAMS: I grew up in Los Angeles.

LP: And this says you were born in 1965?

CW: I was. Yeah.

LP: And you spent most of your life in Los Angeles.

CW: I spent my entire life in Los Angeles until I went to college. And I chose the college I went to just 'cause I wanted to get far from Los Angeles. Like most teenagers, I think, you just want to go as far away as you can, so that's what I did.

LP: Did you grow up religious or participate in any youth groups?

CW: I was raised Catholic, so I went to Catholic school for 10 years. Me and all of my sisters. I guess my mom, my grandmother, they were fairly religious, so we observed all of the holidays and stuff. My family was not a religious family per se. None of my sisters and I are practicing Catholics anymore.

LP: And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

CW: I have three older sisters.

LP: Now, you were born in 1965. So right around the age when you're starting to think about things, that's like the mid 70s. That's like the time everybody laughs at, kind of, in history. What do you remember about your youth in the 70s?

CW: Oh. Huh. I had actually a pretty bad memory from my youth, for no particular reason. The thing that I most remember is -- probably because I have photographs of it -- my sisters and I used to do TV and commercials and movies because we grew up in Los Angeles and my mom -- I think we got involved in it through -- we used to take dance classes and have recitals and I think that's how we got involved in it. We got an agent and so we used to do those things. So that's one of the things I remember the most about that period is working at movie studios, just how fun that was and how it was -- I think, you know, I surely wasn't conscious of it at the time, but it was a very L.A. childhood, I

think, in that regard because -- I really remember traveling around L.A. a lot, and I remember going to work at the studios, which was really fun. It was really fun.

LP: So were all the kids you grew up with doing stuff like that?

CW: No. In fact, I think I was the only kid in my school who did it. But because my two -- two of my other sisters did it. One is darker than me and the other one is lighter than me. And the one who's darker got all of the work 'cause in the 70s -- they used to tell my mom this, I guess, when she would take us for interviews. They had no interest in my lighter sister because she didn't look black enough, so they couldn't place her. I would work occasionally, but my oldest sister got the most work and she hated it the most. She was the one who didn't really want to do it, but...we were very, very close, so I just -- my sisters and I were always involved in the same things, but not really my friends as much. Although the other kids we went to dance class with were involved in it.

LP: So, do you remember hearing about sexuality as a child, from your sisters or dance class or other people you hung around with?

CW: Hearing about sexuality. No, I don't remember that per se. I mean, I do -- what I do remember and it wasn't ever that I heard about it was -- virtually all of the men in my dad's family are gay. My dad isn't and one of my cousins is not, but all his uncles, like all of the men in his family, and they were always a really, sort of, integral part of our family. So we knew their partners, but it was never discussed. My parents never talked about it. It was always just kind of a given thing. But they never talked about -- and my sisters and I never really talked about sex or sexuality. We never did.

LP: Wow. Is that the Catholic thing?

CW: I don't know. I think it could partly be the Catholic thing. It could partly just be the way in which we were sort of brought up to relate to each other. My sisters and I are very close, we're still close, but we don't ever talk about really personal things, so we don't really talk about relationships and we never did. You know, heterosexual or homosexual, we never talked about any of that stuff ever. Boyfriends, girlfriends. People would just appear and that would be somebody's boyfriend or my girlfriend, but that would be it.

LP: So at the dinners everybody just kind of went on as business as usual and didn't the sexual aspects of...?

CW: Never, that I remember. They may remember differently, but I don't remember it.

LP: Do you remember the first time you saw a lesbian?

CW: No, and was through (?) conscious of that.

LP: A lesbian image?

CW: Oh, I don't remember, actually. And part of that could be because I came out when I was older, when I was almost 30. And not because I was in the closet, but just because it sort of took me that long to figure it out, so I remember lesbian images in college, but I certainly -- no, in high school. I guess I remember it from high school. I mean, I went to an all girls high school, so, yeah, probably from that. But before that I don't really remember.

LP: So, when did you realize you were gay?

CW: I was old. I was, like, 29.

LP: How did it happen?

CW: Very...organically, I guess. I mean, it just sort of -- it was kind of slowly but it just kind of dawned on me. It wasn't like some woman I had a crush on or something, which I know is the way a lot of people figure it out. It was just kind of this process of thinking and thinking about relationships and who I had been with and hadn't, and I just realized, "Oh, I think I've been looking in the wrong place." So, it was very kind of uneventful.

LP: So, did you come out right after that?

CW: Yes. Yeah.

LP: Was that before you started actually dating woman? You just kind of knew that this is what you wanted? Did it take having a girlfriend before...?

CW: It was kind of simultaneous. I mean, I guess I had figured it out and maybe within a year of that I had come out to my family and all of my friends. And I think I kind of waited in a sense to attach it to a relationship because at that point I think I had a bit of a reputation in my family as being the one who never brought anybody to dinners and events and stuff. And it was because I didn't date for about eight years, sort of completely missing the boat clearly as to why it was happening. But I think that's why I waited, so they couldn't -- 'cause I just anticipated them saying "Alright, are you still going to be alone at all the dinners?" So I thought -- that was what I wanted to avoid more than -- I didn't think I'd have any trouble with them, coming out, and I didn't. I more didn't want them to say, "Well, you're still an old maid." So, I waited.

LP: So, when did you start photographing?

CW: I started photographing when I was in college, when I was a teenager, so I was about 17. It was my sophomore year of college and I took my first photo class and, you know -- yeah, I took my first photo class the first semester of my sophomore year, so I was 17 and I took the standard bad pictures that everybody takes their first semester of photography.

LP: So, you did photography before you were gay.

CW: Yeah.

LP: Did your photography change after you came out?

CW: Well...no, that kind of remains to be seen because I haven't really actively made pictures since I came out. I've made very few comparatively. I mean, my pictures were primarily self-portraits. It's maybe about a year into taking photo classes I started making self-portraits, and my work was virtually all self-portraiture. It was all portraiture, but virtually all self-portraiture up until then. But I stopped really actively photographing and have only recently -- and I mean, like, in the last couple months --- resumed, so it sort of - - I can't really tell you if that will affect the way that I photograph.

LP: So, what got you back into taking pictures again?

CW: Wanting to find work, actually. I mean, I do freelance work. I do freelance writing and editing. And I really like photo history and I like writing, but I don't want to get a Ph.D. and I had an M.F.A. and I thought, "Well, if I make pictures, then my M.F.A. degree will be more useful and it will be cheaper to resume making pictures than to go back to get a Ph.D." So it's kind of for practical reasons. I mean, part of it -- my partner is also an artist and we sort of talked about different ideas together and things to do together, but really a lot of it was practical. I was tired of applying for jobs that I was interested in but didn't have the right degree for.

LP: So, what kind of jobs were you going for?

CW: Like curatorial jobs or certain teaching jobs. And I would never apply for the ones that said you had to have a Ph.D. and sometimes they would say "Ph.D. preferred," but inevitably the job went to someone with a Ph.D. All of them went to someone with a Ph.D., so I just realized as much as I like doing photo history, I don't want another degree, so...

LP: So, how have you been able to support yourself?

CW: For most of my working life -- post-school because before that I had many, many, many, many, many different kinds of jobs -- I've mostly done museum-related work, curatorial work. I've always worked in some capacity related to museums and curating in photography specifically. But even within that, a variety of jobs. And then I worked at a college as a visual resource curator, basically the slide librarian. So I've always kind of had these related jobs and that's how I've supported myself. I've been freelancing -- I had a fellowship for a year and that sort of broke me out of that sort of 9-to-5 job cycle.

LP: Where did you get the fellowship from?

CW: It's at Stanford, and it was to work on a writing project, a project I'm doing about an artist model. And then after that year I wanted to stay in the Bay Area, so I started to

freelance, so I've been freelancing for a little more than a year. And it's tough, it's very tough to earn money, freelancing. It's tough for me 'cause it's a constant hustle.

LP: So, you're freelance writing and...?

CW: Writing and editing.

LP: What kind of places are you working for?

CW: I mostly have worked for museums. For museums, actually. I haven't really written for journals. Some non-profit galleries. Like, I'll write brochure text, but it's been mostly for museums.

LP: So, when did you move out to San Francisco?

CW: I moved to San Francisco, actually, at the beginning of September. I moved to the Bay Area -- I moved to Palo Alto in 2002 and I lived there a year.

LP: And you moved there from...?

CW: Santa Fe, New Mexico. I was living in New Mexico.

LP: You need to back up. So you finished up school in...?

CW: Oh. I went to college in New Jersey and then I went to graduate school in New Mexico, in Albuquerque. And I was there for five years, and then moved to L.A. for a year for an internship and then moved to New York for a year, for my first real job, but I hated New York.

LP: So, how was Santa Fe?

CW: Oh, Santa Fe. I moved there in '99. I moved back there in '99. And I grew to really love it. I really wanted to move back there because I missed New Mexico and I wanted to live there, but it took me much longer to adjust to living there than I expected it would. It took me about two years to really get to love it. And I did really love it by the time I left. A year later I really liked it.

LP: It's cold.

CW: It is cold, but it's a beautiful place. I mean, it's also a very, kind of, isolated place. And especially for what I do. I mean, when I moved there I thought -- I mean, my specialty as a historian is images of black women and, you know, when I moved there I thought, oh, the Internet, my friends have connections. I don't need to be in a place where there's a large black population, because the black population of Santa Fe is less than 2%, but I found that it did really affect my ability to do my work because there wasn't a kind of support system around of people working on similar things or even related things.

LP: So, even being in the artists' community there, in spite of that was kind of difficult because of the lack of diversity, I guess.

CW: Yeah, because of the lack of diversity. I mean, all my work took place elsewhere. I didn't really do any work in New Mexico. Everything that I wrote, everything that I participated in was taking place somewhere else.

LP: So you left New Mexico and went to New York for your first real job.

CW: Yes.

LP: And what was your first real job?

CW: My first real job was as curator of prints and photographs at the Schaumburg Center, which is part of the New York Public Library.

LP: It sounds great, doesn't it?

CW: Doesn't it sound great? It was one of those sort of moments in retrospect where you think, "Huh, what if I had just said no?" What happened was I had this curatorial internship for a year right out of grad school and as it was coming to an end I applied for this program that the Schaumburg Center has for scholars to come, and I actually applied as an artist to work with their photographs to make my own photographs. But during the course of my application process the woman I applied to work with, Deborah Willis, who has since become a really good friend of mine, left. She had been there for like 12 years, and she left to go to the Smithsonian. So they contacted me and basically then asked me to apply for the job. It's like my first real job. I thought, "Oh, that's so exciting. Of course." And so I got the job, but in retrospect I think that probably led me down a different path than I might have taken had I remained there or had I just said, "No, I'd rather stick with the artists' residency," because that was kind of the beginning of the end of me really making pictures.

LP: That first job out of school?

CW: Yeah, kind of. 'Cause, you know, you start to work and that takes up all your time and you just kind of -- I did -- just kind of got further and further away from taking the time and finding the space to make work.

LP: So, after your hellish New York experience --

CW: Yeah, it was totally hellish.

LP: Wasn't it great quitting?

CW: Oh my god, it was so gratifying. In fact, I hated my boss. That precipitated a lot of

it. I couldn't get along with him, and so I couldn't be at all effectual at my job. You know, I gave my notice. I gave two weeks' notice 'cause I knew that was basic courtesy. People in those positions apparently give much longer notice and actually usually last longer in their jobs. But I remember the day that I left, he was standing in the lobby. And I gave my notice and he never said another word to me. And so when I came down I was walking out the door -- it's that feeling where you're starting to rise because you're like, "My god, that's the last time I have to walk out of this place." And he moved toward me to shake my hand and I looked at him like, "Are you insane?" and I backed up and walked out the door. And I thought, "You know, you never even spoke to me after I gave my notice." So, that was the good feeling, quitting that job.

LP: How long did that last?

CW: The job? A year. I barely made it a year. Barely. Yeah. And, I mean, it was a great job, and it could have been a great job had either of us been different people and able to work together. But because we couldn't, I couldn't really get anything done.

LP: So, out of New York and back to --

CW: Back to Los Angeles.

LP: Which must have been a big change.

CW: It was a total change, and in fact it was very humbling because I took a part-time office assistant job in the museum where I had worked before. So that was totally humbling because I just needed work. And at that point I really wanted to be back in the West very badly, so I thought, "This is more important than my ego." But, I mean, that was humbling 'cause it was about the lowest position in the department. I basically typed and filed.

LP: What museum is this?

CW: The Getty Museum in Los Angeles, in the department of photographs. But it was also -- it also sort of started me, I think, on the path that led me to freelance. From there I ended up doing a multiplicity of things simultaneously. 'Cause that was a part-time job and soon after that I also went to work for a private collector who was a friend of the curator in that department. And at one point during that period I was simultaneously working four jobs. I worked for him, I worked for his mother, I still worked at this department of the museum, and I also was teaching. I taught a photo course, subbing for someone who was on sabbatical.

LP: So, when did you start studying photo history as opposed to doing photography?

CW: I started studying at the same time that I started doing it because I went to -- the undergraduate school I went to and the grad school I chose both really heavily emphasize photo history, so I kind of did them together all along.

LP: Okay. What kind of difficulties did you face trying to show your work, if any?

CW: I never tried to show my work. The difficulties in showing my work -- I did show my work a couple of times -- was always in the way my work was handled. I had work lost. I had work damaged. It seemed like every time I would send it out for a show. So really quickly I figured out that I hated exhibiting because it was always -- something would come back or not come back. There was no part of it that I liked. That experience was part of why I decided I wasn't going to pursue exhibiting my work, 'cause it was just unpleasant.

LP: So, your photo history work is in the book *The Black People Body...?*

CW: It's a long title. They insisted on a title with a colon. Isn't that absurd? 'Cause we wanted it to just be a very short, no-nonsense title and the publisher wouldn't let us. It's totally absurd.

LP: So, what was the process behind getting that work published?

CW: That was a hellish process, too. It was a very long process. That work sort of grew out of that experience at the Schaumburg because I co-wrote it with Deborah Willis, who was the person who had been there whom I'd applied to work with. We were having conversations that whole year I was in New York because I would call her every few weeks and say, "How long do I have to stay in this job?" And so we became friends and we talked about images and stuff that we were finding and seeing, and we both started to gather these pictures, so...It was probably that year we started to talk about turning it into a book. So from then until publication, it was about a 10-year process. It took us about 10 years.

LP: Wow. That's a long time.

CW: Yeah, it was a long time.

LP: So, that book is, like, not a decent way to earn a living?

CW: No. Although we have received royalties on it since it was published. In fact -- this is telling somebody else's business, but -- Deb has published, I don't know, 20, 30 books, something like that, in her career and it's the only one that has ever paid her royalties. So either Temple Press just has a very good business department or I'm not sure what, but you can't earn a living publishing that way.

LP: Now that you're doing the freelance stuff, what do you do for healthcare?

CW: I have my own healthcare through College Art Association, their group plan. But it's absurd because I just changed my -- when I moved to San Francisco they raised my rates and so I changed my deductible, and so now I basically can't afford to use my

healthcare. So I have decent coverage, it's just that my deductible is \$2,000, so I don't use it. For a long time, though, before I was freelancing, mostly during the period when I was working a lot of different part-time jobs and didn't have healthcare, I'd just go to the free clinic. I was living in Los Angeles and I would just go to the free clinic because I didn't have it.

LP: So, what's the group that you bought it through?

CW: Oh. College Art Association. It's a professional organization. Most people join College Art because they have a really extensive job network thing, but I initially joined it, I think, when I was a grad student because it seemed to be the thing you were supposed to do. And then it lapsed for a long time and I really resumed my membership to get group health coverage.

LP: That's nice. I bet it helps a lot of artists especially. I know it's been a while since you've taken pictures, but I was listening to your interview on the radio and you were talking about, from the book, about the black female body, about the feeling of being looked at, being positioned, being placed, and having the body used. How would you say that the pictures that you did of yourself are different than the kind of voyeuristic, offensive photographs that some people can take?

CW: Well, I think...I mean, the sort of simplistic answer is, I think they're different because I made them of myself. I mean, they were very much in response to those more sort of, what I thought were exploitative pictures that other people made of subjects. I think in responding to them, my intention was for them to kind of be coated with some of that language, if that makes sense, so that...That's a very good question, and I'm not sure that I have a really good answer. I think it's...I often don't think of that question in terms of my own work, but I think about it because of the writing that I do comparing, say, an image that a white photographer has made of a black woman and a black photographer has made of a black woman and trying to determine why those are different if they look essentially the same. And I haven't really settled on a good response to that other than, you know, intent is everything. But even sometimes the intentions are similar, and so I don't really know how to respond to that. I like to think with self-portraiture -- one of the reasons why I was interested in it -- it's very funny, when you make self-portraits people will say to you, "God, you must be really narcissistic," as though somehow self-portraits reflect narcissism. But for me it was really important to kind of eliminate that middle man. I felt like -- I mean, I could certainly probably make exploitative pictures of myself, and I've seen some self-portraits by other people that I think are kind of borderline. And I just think it's all in the way that you sort of handle everything: the positioning, the lighting, your expression, kind of everything. Because I think you can misrepresent yourself, or represent yourself in an exploitative way.

LP: A lot of what you do is kind of analysis of the photographs, looking at the way in which the person took it and how their point of view plays in. Do you have people that rail against that idea that a photograph can be more than just a picture?

CW: That rail against the idea that it can be more than just a picture?

LP: Yeah, people that say, "Well, it's just a picture. It's just an image."

CW: Oh, sure. Yes.

LP: There's so much analysis that goes into -- somebody can say, "Oh, who are you kidding about the horizon?" or "What are you talking about with the angle of the camera? That doesn't matter."

CW: Oh, yeah. You totally get that. I mean, probably the most humorous example of that was...I was asked to write an essay about the whole Janet Jackson breast sort-of scandal earlier this year. It was for *New York Newsday*, which is a Long Island newspaper. And right after it was published I got a call from the producers of the Bill O'Reilly show, and they wanted me to come on and talk about the Janet Jackson pictures. So, my initial reaction was, "Oh, hell no." I thought, no. But they had called my publisher first, who was all excited because to them it just meant publicity. And so I said no, and then the publisher called me back, "Are you sure? Are you sure you don't want to do it?" And then your sort-of perverseness kicks in and you think, "Alright, I'll do it." So I did go on "The O'Reilly Factor." That was his total attitude. My whole point was, sort of, to place this image of Janet Jackson in the context of the way in which black women have been represented from -- and I cited examples from, like, *National Geographic* to Vanessa Williams, those *Penthouse* pictures of her, and the Bennetton ads that came out in the 80s -- you probably don't remember this. It was a close-up of a black woman's body nursing a white child. But he was not having it. His whole thing was just -- I mean, he's a moron. His whole attitude was completely dismissive, with that sort of tone of "It's just an image." His sort-of perspective was that black women weren't treated any differently from any other women in the way that they were pictured. And the things he cited were *Playboy* magazine and Victoria's Secret runway shows.

LP: There's racial equality in porn.

CW: Yeah, he did. I was here in Oakland at the studio, so I couldn't see him. All I had on was this sort of mic thing, and they didn't turn on the monitor, so I couldn't see what they were putting up on the screen, which were these pictures from Victoria's Secret and *Playboy*. And of course he's, you know, a total badgering idiot, so you can't really get a word in edgewise because what I wanted to cite were these pictures of Naomi Campbell that appeared in *Playboy*, in one of which she is being mounted by a tiger. But you can't sort of get all of that out in the few seconds that you have. Of course they're not depicted in the same way. But I think his response really reflects a very general attitude toward that kind of analysis of pictures: that you're going overboard. A picture's just a picture.

LP: You are a lesbian, and most of your work is kind of secular, so to speak, in terms of lesbianism. What do you think lesbian photography is, if you have a concept of it at all?

CW: You know, it's a tough one because I've tried to do a lot of research on lesbian photographers and particular artists. 'Cause I wrote some encyclopedia entries on lesbian artists for this online encyclopedia. In doing that research -- it's kind of like I imagine it must have been like for Deb or early people who were trying to figure out black photographers. Lesbian photographers -- I mean, it's sort of one of those things where clearly there's an entire gamut of imagery represented in the work of lesbian photographers. I mean, I think -- it's just like saying "black photographers." That in and of itself doesn't describe anything. Some lesbians, their images have lesbian content and some could be landscapes, could be anything that really has none. I think, for me the significance of that--

(Side 2)

CW: The importance of doing that, I think, is to sort of be more inclusive in the way in which we look at photography overall. I mean, I think that what happens is, you know, lesbian photographers, women who are out, their work automatically will get marginalized, for the most part. So you'll have people who are very successful, like Kathy Opee (?) or Gay Block (?). But their work isn't really -- Kathy Opee certainly is -- but one person sort of doesn't make a genre. So I think lesbian photography is significant in that it acknowledges the work of lesbian artists, but I think -- From what I can tell there is no sort of genre of lesbian photography, just the way there really is no genre of black photography.

LP: Do you think that there's a lesbian sensibility or an African-American sensibility?

CW: I think that there is lesbian subject matter and I think that there is African-American subject matter. And I think that those subjects tend to be covered by lesbians and African-Americans. But to call it a sensibility -- I mean, that's where I think it gets tricky because I think for African-Americans or lesbians whose work doesn't sort of fit that sensibility, then no. Their work, their sensibility could be something totally different. Let's see, who would be a good example of that? Katherine Ragmeer (?). I mean, her work doesn't have, to me, has no sort of lesbian sensibility to it, but she's a lesbian photographer. I think it's really more of a subject thing than...

LP: Do you think that there's a lesbian photography community? Do you talk a lot with other lesbian photographers in the area?

CW: I know other lesbian photographers in the area, I mean, who are my friends, so yeah, I talk to them, but not sort of about being lesbian photographers. I mean, it's mostly about "Oh, did you hear about this show?" It's usually, you know, trying to share information about opportunities for money or duties for exhibition, the same conversations I'd have with any artist friends. But I think that there is -- I probably haven't lived in the Bay Area long enough to know if there's a community of lesbian photographers here. I remember once someone contacted me -- we were both working on essays about lesbian artists for an anthology that Tee Courin (?) was working on that she didn't end up doing. But at that time that person, in the South somewhere, I think, told

me -- I was still living in Santa Fe and she's like, "Oh, well, I heard that every, like, Friday night there's a group of lesbian artists that get together and meet and talk," and I never could figure out who they were or where they were meeting, what her point of reference was. I mean, for me the photo community is very small, although I am one of those people who sort of counts and catalogs lesbian photographers the way I do black photographers. I don't feel like I'm part of a specific lesbian photography community.

LP: Do you have any problems with censorship?

CW: Not that I know of. I mean, I don't put my work out there often enough to know.

LP: Even with the book that you did with Deborah Willis? There's a lot of pictures in there that show a lot of...

CW: We weren't censored, *per se*, but when the publisher -- I guess sort of each season they put out a catalog for upcoming books and whatever year that was, one of the images from our book was on the cover of that catalog. The image they chose was a picture of a woman with her shirt off. She's kind of reclining and smiling. And they chose that one because it was from a collection at Temple University. And they apparently got a tremendous amount of negative response, like people saying, "Don't ever send me your catalogs again. It's pornographic." We did get those kinds of responses. I got them less. Deb really got them, from men always. I did have one woman ask me about it. We had a lot of people sort of consider the book pornographic. And someone asked about whether or not we should have republished those pictures because they felt our book was further objectifying some of the subjects, but no one -- outright censorship, no.

LP: Finally, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

CW: Um...

LP: Actually, I'll just back it up a little bit. I forgot to ask you about your parents.

CW: Oh. Okay.

LP: To back it all the way back. So, your parents are married?

CW: Yes, they are married but separated.

LP: And how long were they together for?

CW: 46 years.

LP: Wow. And they separated after 46 years?

CW: Yes. They're insane. Yeah, you know, they probably should have separated 20 years before that. I mean, they're good Catholics. I guess my dad's a good Catholic. I

mean, he's Catholic, but I wouldn't call him a good Catholic. They're very typical of many couples in their generation in which they sort of marry and have children and then their children grow up and then they are left alone and discover they don't really have anything in common. So I think that's part of what happened with them. So yeah, they separated after many years of being together and just being really unhappy together, but they'll never divorce. Part of it is because of insurance and pensions and that kind of thing. It doesn't make economical sense. And part of it is probably their Catholicism, although not a huge part of it.

LP: We'll end it on that unless you have anything else.

CW: No, I don't think so. I guess one thing I will say, just in my own research about lesbian photographers, is that it's still really frustrating how many people are closeted and whose work you can't talk about in terms of them being lesbian.

LP: Ah, that's what else I wanted to ask you about. I'm glad you brought that up. Working on the -- is that the *GLBTQ Encyclopedia*?

CW: Yeah.

LP: Okay. Working on that, I've noticed that it's one of the only places you can go to find out if some people were gay because the archives that house the main part of their collections don't have the word "gay" anywhere near them.

CW: Oh, interesting.

LP: How do you find out?

CW: Well, you know, it's totally tricky. 'Cause I remember after I submitted some of my entries, the editor came back like, "Are you sure? Are you sure? Because we don't want any lawsuits. Are you sure?" Because the idea was that if I had at least two sources that identified someone as gay I could call them gay and at least then we could cite those if somebody decided they didn't want to be gay.

LP: Is that the standard?

CW: I have no idea what's the standard. That was actually for the popular music entry that I wrote.

LP: Who was that?

CW: Oh, who was it? I don't even know if they were specific people, but there were a ton of people in that entry, from Johnny Mathis to Liberace. Johnny Mathis was easy because the exact article where he came out is well known. But so many people also still don't know that he is gay. Like I can't even believe the number of friends I've had who have said, "Johnny Mathis was gay?" I'm like, "Johnny Mathis? How could you not think

he was gay?" But, you know, that's also a tricky thing because even on my web site I have gotten people who have emailed to say -- 'cause I have rainbow flags next to the gay and lesbian queer artists, and I have one next to Tracy Chapman -- and I've had several people email me, "How do you know she's gay? She's never come out. How do you know she's gay? You shouldn't out people." And for me that was a really tough one because I think, "But she's never denied being gay, and I happen to know that she's gay 'cause I know people who know her." I'm not really outing her. It's sort of a tricky thing. For the entries that I wrote -- and I'm not sure what the standard is for that encyclopedia - - you just really had to search and search and search again. And there were quite a few people who I could have mentioned, particularly the arts entries, 'cause they just weren't out and they weren't ever going to be out, even though I knew they were lesbians, the references that I referenced knew they were lesbians, but we just couldn't mention them. That is disappointing. In 2004, I find that really frustrating and difficult. I don't know. Would it expand the numbers you could talk about significantly? Probably. It would probably more than double them altogether, but just for different reasons I guess people are still very -- I mean, people's reasons do vary. Some are afraid of not getting work. Some just don't want to be categorized by their sexuality, which I always think is just dumb. I think it's better to check all the boxes that you fit. And I think that comes from my own sensibility as someone who does a lot of research, and needing those points of reference to get to the people you're interested in, you want to know. I think people should check all the boxes that apply instead of none of them, as though somehow they exist in a world where it doesn't matter.

LP: I like the ones that are kind of in denial. I think the Library of Congress has a bunch of stuff by Janet Flanner.

CW: Oh yeah?

LP: ...who's a lesbian, has pictures of her lover. They put pictures of her lover on the web site, but at no point does it mention her sexuality at all.

CW: How interesting. Yeah, Britney Sabat (?) is a photographer who -- that sort of similarly happens with her. Yeah, I mean, it's totally -- Apparently, even like Alice Austin, was a well-known lesbian photographer from the turn of the century in New York. I think the Alice Austin House, which is now an historic site, doesn't mention it or something, like they maybe mention her friend who lived there. Something like that.

LP: Actually, I was looking up information for her and I read online that they specifically don't want people using their archive for sexuality-related research.

CW: I mean, and she has these just wonderful pictures of women with women. I know, it's just...yeah, it's totally ridiculous and unfortunate, but -- I mean, you know, this is not pandering. That's why projects like yours are important and why records and oral histories and written histories and all are so important because --

LP: I've done a great job getting people interested in history to do it, so they understand.

CW: Oh yeah, 'cause I have definitely experienced coming up against those walls and not having enough information to go on.

LP: I'm like, "Wait a second. Is this person gay? Can I cite this one thing and use this wealth of research that another source has on them?"

CW: I know.

LP: So, it's hard having a personal history. I was reading -- someone wrote in a book Cathy Cade (?) did at the beginning that lesbians don't have as easy of a time in history because lesbians don't bear children that are lesbians. It's not like African-Americans where you can pass the history down or even pass down a culture because most of the parents of lesbians don't share that same history and culture, so it's a little bit --

CW: And that could be part of it, 'cause there's not that sort of tradition of passing down, but it's mostly because our histories have been censored and erased and squelched and thrown away. That's more of the problem.

LP: We'll end on that one.

CW: Okay.