Gregorio A. Millett ’90
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
SpeakOut
May 15, 2018
Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

OLACHEA: Okay, so my name is Barbara Olachea [pronounced oh-lah-CHAY-uh. I’m part of the Class of 2019. I’m located in Dartmouth’s Rauner Special Collections Library, conducting an interview for SpeakOut, and today is March [sic; May?] 15th, 2018.

If you could go ahead and introduce yourself and give me your location as well.

MILLETT: Sure. My name is Gregorio [A.] Millett [pronouncing it mill-ET], “Greg” Millett [pronouncing it MILL-it], and I am speaking from Washington, D.C.

OLACHEA: Okay. So I wanted to start off by—in order gain I guess a better understanding of your background and its influence leading up to your time at Dartmouth, could you start by telling me about your early upbringing?

MILLETT: Sure. I come from an immigrant family. My parents are Panamanian, with family in Cuba as well as family in other parts of the West Indies, from Saint Lucia to Jamaica and other areas. You know, education was always extremely important in our family. Being first-generation American, I grew up in New York City [New York]. It was always a foregone conclusion that I was going to go off and get a bachelor’s degree and then some sort of graduate degree afterwards.

From my earliest memories, I remember my parents talking about how important it is to have an education, particularly in the United States, and how far you’re able to go with one, perhaps a little farther from some of the places where they came from, and how we have this new opportunity to do well in the U.S. So a lot of that was—was ingrained in me.

I grew up in New York City. My mother worked for the United Nations, and my father was a microbiologist who worked in Greenwich Village [a neighborhood in New York City]. So,

you know, I had not only that diversity in terms of my family but also the diversity of New York City as a backdrop.

OLACHEA: Do you think that your parents' background sort of influenced I guess your perspective on different issues? Do you have an awareness, growing up, sort of relating to—to your different identities? And when would you say you started to become aware of them?

MILLETT: Oh, I—I think I was aware of them from the very beginning. You know, growing up, even—even though I was growing up in a city as diverse as New York, at the time, it was not common to have a black family speaking Spanish or French in public, and I remember being in different places where my African-American friends and other friends would look at me and say, "Well, you know, what *are* you?" And I'd say, "Well, I'm—I'm American." "You know, well, but that's not true because your family speaks to you in other languages, and—and, you know, African-Americans are"—back then, of course, the term [was] "black"—"black people do not speak other languages, other than English, so—so what *are* you?" And it was just, you know, this really interesting thing where people were kind of putting you into a box based on the fact that your family spoke multiple languages and that it was a foregone conclusion that blacks, black Americans in particular, did not speak other languages other than English.

So it was just really fascinating to have that. And that certainly started at a very early age, where you felt like, *Yeah, you know, you're black American, but you're also a big of an "other" as well.* And had that recreated as well even at school, where some of my friends were wondering, "Well, why do you want to do so well in school? I mean, school really doesn't matter." And they—they didn't necessarily come from immigrant backgrounds that way that I had.

And there was just a bit of a divergence that was there, and I would usually find myself in these AP [Advanced Placement] classes and other classes where I'd be the only black student with white students. And, you know, you've that distance there as well. So it—it operated on multiple levels, and I think I was keenly aware of all of that at a very early age.

OLACHEA: So would you say that in high school—you mentioned you had this, like, heightened awareness already, coming from an immigrant family and knowing that education was important—would you say that that changed or sort of continued when you came to Dartmouth?

MILLETT: I think it—it—it definitely continued when I came to Dartmouth. And, you know, to be honest, part of the reason why I chose Dartmouth was because of what the college was going through at the time. You know, just to paint a picture, it was in the middle of the [President Ronald W.] Reagan era. In the 1980s there were a lot of protests that were taking place in terms of U.S. investments in South Africa.

At the time, Dartmouth had a few students who erected a structure on the [Dartmouth] Green. It was a shanty, protesting Dartmouth investments in South Africa. A couple of other students, some of whom are actually very well known [chuckles] today, like Dinesh [J.] D'Souza [Class of 1983], Laura [A.] Ingraham [Class of 1985]. I think even perhaps Tucker [M.] Carlson and others were among a group or sympathetic to a group that tore down the shanties because they said that it, you know, destroyed the beauty of the Green, and they didn't see this as an issue that people needed to be talking about or thinking about in terms of investments in South Africa, where, of course, apartheid was—was reigning at the time.

And that caused a huge international news. I remember on the front of *The New York Times* there was all this news, and in *The Boston Globe* and everything else about racial discord at Dartmouth and starting a conversation about South Africa at Dartmouth, and what does this mean at Dartmouth, and will they be able to recruit students of color there?

And I have to admit there was a part of me that was electrified by that. I thought, *Well, you know, this is a school that is undergoing a demographic and cultural shift from an Ivy League,* where it was essentially privilege, where it was essentially white, where it was all male—I mean, Dartmouth was *the* last Ivy League to go co-ed, after all. And I thought, *You know, this is an opportunity for me to be outside of my*

environment in New York City, which is incredibly diverse, where I've grown up with a lot of people who are very different from me, to be in a place where there's not going to be that type of difference, where I'm not going to necessarily have the crutch that I've had in New York, where you <u>can</u> be diverse and—and—and—and—and express different opinions and what have you, where things are going to be a little bit more uniform and where there's going to be a cusp of change that's taking place.

And I figured, *You know,*—I was young and idealistic, and I thought, *You know, I want to be a part of that change. I want to help Dartmouth make that transition from a college that perhaps is less diverse, less welcoming of other voices and marginalized voices, and—and—and move towards a future that's a little bit more welcoming for—for many other groups.*

OLACHEA: I want to take a step back, and sort of relating to your perceptions of Dartmouth at the time, from the information you previously gave me, you met a student here when you were visiting?

MILLETT: Yeah, there was a—there was a program. I can't remember what the name of the program was, but in the wake of *The New York Times* articles and all the media, negative media that Dartmouth had in the wake of the whole shanty town incident, there was a lot of concern on the college's part that they were not going to be able to recruit students of color. So they had a specific program, and I believe this program is the one that I went on, was for African-American students, where you came for a weekend, you visited the college, you stayed in the dorm room of other African-American students, and they essentially, you know, took you around the campus, where you could see what campus life was like on a day-to-day basis, get a feel for it, you know, understand what some of the classes were like, the teachers and everything else, just to acquaint yourself with the college.

And that weekend culminated in an event that they had at Collis [Center for Student Involvement], where, you know, many of the African-American students would get up and tell different stories about their lives and who they were or what they were interested in or just perform something.

And there was one student—I believe his name was Michael [R.] Williams [Class of 1986; now Michael Évora]—I think he was a 19- —I think he was an '86. I'm not sure. Slim, effeminate, African-American man, tall, who got up and said, you know, essentially, "I'm black, I'm gay, and I have no apologies for either identity," that "I am proud of myself. I'm proud of who I am, despite what society says about me."

And he went on for longer than that, but it just struck me because, you know, at the time, immigrants were being stigmatized (just like now), African-Americans were being stigmatized (unfortunately also just like now), and even lesbians were incredibly stigmatized. This was—I can't even- you know, to give people an idea of what it was like to be gay in the '80s, it was a completely different world. You know, during the height of the AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] epidemic, you would see graffiti scrawled in bathrooms with the words "GAY," and it would be an acronym, like "Got AIDS Yet?" And there was all this antipathy about being gay.

So to have somebody—in a small, rural area, a small college, where there are few people who look like him, who are African-American, and even fewer who'd be willing to identify as gay—be proud of who he was and to be so forthright and strong and have such an incredible strength around him, I thought, *Well, you know, if this college has anything to do with this man becoming who he is, then I definitely need to come here.* And that really was the defining moment that sealed the deal for me in choosing Dartmouth.

OLACHEA: Could you tell me, now that we're talking about your experience and sort of the beginning of it, maybe, like, the transition and maybe some formative experiences from your early years? How was it, going back to your community after maybe your first couple of months at Dartmouth?

MILLETT: You know, I remember getting to Dartmouth, and I think we all had these incredibly high expectations and also a lot of worry. I mean, you're going to an Ivy League school, you did not know what to expect, you're definitely outside of your environment, and there were certain things that I learned that were completely new to me.

I remember the first week or two weeks there, and you saw these people in these jackets, these sort of lettered varsity jackets that said “Choate [Rosemary Hall]” or “St. Paul’s [School]” or, you know, another name on there. These are all names that were foreign to me. I mean, I didn’t grow up in poverty or even middle class; I came from an upper middle-class background, but I didn’t know anything about these private schools that very wealthy students and others had gone to beforehand.

And I remember turning to friends and just saying jokingly, you know, “Are these gangs? What—what—what *is* this?” [Chuckles.] And they had to explain to me what Choate and St. Paul’s and all these other things were. I was like, *Oh, okay, so this—this—this is how folks roll here. This is something that’s completely different and apart from my experience.* That’s one of the earliest things that I remember.

I also remember, in terms of a transition, how different things were for people. I mean, you would always hear jokes about students who had arrived there who genuinely did not know how to take care of themselves. And I definitely encountered that. I remember going downstairs within the first two weeks of my dorm and was washing clothes and had to teach to somebody how—how to use the washer and dryer. And it was obviously somebody who had this done for them their entire lives and did not know how to use the machines. So that—that was something that struck me as—as—as very different and interesting.

I also remember a lot of the drinking and partying when I first got there. And, of course, Dartmouth is still having that—particularly then, in the ’80s, that residual power of being an *Animal House* type of atmosphere and all these students who were really attracted to that, and I’ve always been a non-drinker all my life, so it was always—I always felt a little bit like [anthropologist] Margaret Mead, looking out, you know, to see all these students partying and getting drunk, and you’d wake up every morning, and there’d be some sort of miscellaneous bodily fluid that’s outside your door or in the bathrooms and everything else, and just thought, *This is—this is really crazy. What’s wrong with these kids? You*

know, why can't they just drink responsibly and—and—and not get sick?

So I think those were sort of my first impressions while there. I—I also had a lot of really wonderful impressions. There were some students that I met during that experience, weekend—I can't remember if it's called a Dartmouth Experience Weekend or something to that effect—who were African-American students who were there, and it was great to reconnect with them when I got there in the early—early months at Dartmouth, as well as some prospective students who also matriculated like I did, who I bonded with that weekend, who were also there. And it was nice to get to know them.

I also have fond memories of the track team. I was recruited personally to join the track team, and that's where I met Keith [O.] Boykin [Class of 1987], who subsequently, you know, came out of the closet himself, right after Dartmouth, when he was at Harvard Law School and was involved in a lot of racial justice work at Harvard Law School and then went on to the [President William J. "Bill"] Clinton administration. And, you know, unbeknownst to me, he was—he was gay as well. I mean, it was funny that I kind of followed his trajectory.

I also came out, and instead of the Clinton administration, I ended up working in the [President Barack H.] Obama White House, so, you know, you—you meet all of these people who are really incredible.

And one of the other people that I met while at Dartmouth, even in my first year, is I became very close with a lot of '87s and '86s and people in classes that were higher than I was, and all of these were just incredible people.

One of them is someone that I continue to work with today. Her name is Jennifer Kates [Class of 1988]. She's a lesbian, one of my close friends while I was at Dartmouth. She's in—two classes ahead of me. And she is a force to be reckoned with in a lot of global and domestic HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] work, and it's really funny that we both continue to work together doing HIV/AIDS work to this day, and we've known each other since college, and we're a

part of each other's support system since college, so, you know, there's a lot of wonderful things that I remember from early on.

I also remember, too, just how jarring it was, the transition of going home to New York City after Dartmouth that first year or so. Again, as I mentioned beforehand, this was the height of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. My father worked in St. Vincent's Hospital [in Manhattan], which was the heart of Greenwich Village. Of course, Greenwich Village was really the center, the heart of the gay community in New York City.

And I remember going home and visiting my dad where he worked, and it felt like death was omnipresent in New York. There were all these people who were sick or dying, who had Kaposi sarcoma, which is essentially, you know, cancer of the skin, that was part of an effect from HIV-AIDS, or people who were wasting away from the disease and everything else.

And just this overwhelming sense of anger that was building because this was happening primarily among gay men. We lived in a society that could care less about gay men, transgender women or lesbians or bisexuals, so the overwhelming majority for most Americans was, like, "Well, if it kills them, who cares?" And you also got that feeling from the White House. I mean, after all, Ronald Reagan didn't mention AIDS for years and wasn't—you know, he had to be goaded into responding to AIDS by—by advocates.

But I remember being in New York City at the time and just going back home and thinking about the duality there, where, you know, Dartmouth was this pristine place, where there's no disease, where everything was just perfect and ideal, only to come home to New York City, to the real world, where, you know, things weren't ideal. There were people my age who were getting sick and they were dying, and every time that I'd come back from break in college, there'd be even more friends who were dying or dead or sick.

So it—it—it was really an interesting time to be gay, an interesting time to be a person of color, where you felt ever so acutely that you were definitely on the margins of American society, and only every now and then being

allowed or privy to being a part of what a privileged few live in their whole lifetimes during the time that I spent at Dartmouth.

OLACHEA: Could you backtrack a little and talk about—you mentioned sort of navigating the social spaces. Did you find that there were certain spaces on campus or organizations that were popular among students of color, queer students of color?

MILLETT: Yes. [Chuckles.] One of the things that I learned really quickly is that there was a small group of students, who really bonded well with one another because essentially all of us were not welcome on campus and not welcomed by alums at the time and, to a certain degree, some other students. So, you know, African-American students, Latino students, Asian, Native American students, students who were immigrants—you know, there were various organizations for women.

There were organizations—or one organization for LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] populations, and there was sort of this tight-knit community of—of this—this group that, you know, essentially were—were the outcasts, the people who were not meant to be at Dartmouth, the people that Dartmouth was not designed for, where there was a lot of closeness and where people really took care of one another and listened to each other.

And every now and then, when you felt like you were about to lose your mind because you're in the middle of New Hampshire and you're hearing the craziest things coming from people who have not experienced people who were different from them and have not really spent much time outside of their bubble, and that you have to check this in with your friends and saying, "Am—am—am I correct in thinking about this?" and that this was really a crazy statement, or not. And it was such a wonderful and incredible and supportive and nurturing network, and, you know, I'm very clear that I wouldn't have made it through Dartmouth without that.

But then I had other experiences, ones that I felt were also incredibly helpful and—and important for me. You know, there were some students who really hadn't spent much time

with communities of color or with people who were different from them, who came from fairly wealthy backgrounds, and I met quite a few students who really wanted to broaden their horizons and did some incredible things.

I remember one friend of mine, Scott [E.] Atwood [Class of 1990], who I'm still friends with to this day. He just got married [chuckles], as a matter of fact, a couple of weeks ago and is off in South Africa right now with his new wife. But, you know, he really did not have much contact with African-American communities or others growing up, and he figured, *You know what? Lemme go ahead and live in*—what we called the AAM, the African-American [sic; Afro-American] Society, where many black students said that was the only white person living there until another friend of his, Hal Rogers, also a friend of ours, lived there as well.

And I thought that that was incredibly brave. And he and I struck up this great friendship. We're both very different people. He's extremely conservative. I'm incredibly progressive. But there was this mutual respect that was there, and you were able to speak to one another about a lot of difficult issues. And, yeah, it's one of those relationships that remains to this day, and not just with him but with some other students, where, you know, we might have come from very different backgrounds, but the fact that both of us made an attempt to reach out to one another and to try to learn a bit about somebody else's life made all the difference in the world and—and—and—absolutely forged these really important and lifelong friendships and relationships.

OLACHEA: You gave me some information about living in the AAM—

MILLETT: Mm-hm.

OLACHEA: —or participating in it and being the only out sexual minority.

MILLETT: Mm-hm.

OLACHEA: Could you give me some sort of insight into that?

MILLETT: It was, you know—again, it was—it was—it was the '80s, and there were just not a lot of out folks at Dartmouth. I—I—I remember the first time that I went to a meeting of—we used

to call it DAGLO [pronounced DAY-glow] back in the day, Dartmouth—I think the Dartmouth Area Gay and Lesbian Organization. I think I still have a DAGLO T-shirt, to tell you the truth.

And you would walk into these meetings. And, of course, the way you'd have to walk in would be surreptitiously. I think it was in Wheeler [Hall] or somewhere, where you had to make sure that nobody was looking at you, and, you know, you essentially went up the stairs, the third passage you made, and then right up—you know, into—to—to a meeting room and close the door quickly because you didn't want anybody to know that you were there.

But even then, any time I think there were maybe fewer than ten of us out of the whole campus, easily, who were out. And of that ten, I was the only black student who was out. There were certainly other black students who I knew about who were gay or lesbian or bisexual, and we would talk about it privately, but none of them were out.

And it was really an interesting space for me to be so publicly identified as gay, which is exactly what I wanted, particularly with the student that I saw during the Dartmouth experience and just saw how resolute and strong he was, and getting some insight in terms of how he became that strong and resolute, because it really was a hostile environment.

There were people who were gay bashed at Dartmouth. There were people who constantly had insults that were hurled at them. There were—I remember one time having lunch with a friend of mine—and this is right before I came out, and it precipitated me coming out—who said that he was looking at a student who was older than us in 1988, who was effeminate and walking around, had some makeup on and some other stuff, and he said, "Well, that guy's gay." And I said, "Well, how do you know?" And he's, like, "You know, I—I—I can spot a g- —" He didn't say "gay." He said, "I can spot a faggot anywhere."

And meanwhile, here I am, having lunch with him. [Laughs.] I just want to say, "Hello, you clearly are not that great with

your “gaydar” because your friend that you’re having lunch with is—is pretty flaming here.”

So it was just a really odd environment. I remember going home to New York City and always feeling happy for the respite of New York because it was so diverse and begin gay was just not an issue. So it was weird. You had Dartmouth there, that was idyllic and incredible and an escape from AIDS, but then you had the freedom of New York City and some of these bigger cities where—where diversity was celebrate, which is not where Dartmouth was at the time.

And—and—and that, I think, really encapsulated my experience there. [Coughs.] Excuse me. I think there are a lot of us who have a very complicated relationship with the school. It was—we’re all very happy about our educations. We’re really glad that we had the opportunities that we had at Dartmouth. But I don’t feel the same about the traditions of Dartmouth, you know, that fellow alums do, who primarily are white, and others, about having to come back every year or this type of allegiance to the school, because it was a really difficult experience.

You were—you were—I was reminded on a daily basis on just how different I was from everybody else, and, except for a minority of students, people could care less that you were there and—and—and if anything, were more—there was more antipathy towards you. So it was—it was a very different experience than the Dartmouth of today.

OLACHEA: You mentioned that you would say that Dartmouth was sort of like idyllic and AIDS sort of seemed like it was occurring outside of the bubble. Were you aware or coming to be aware of the crisis when you started at Dartmouth, and were there students at Dartmouth who were raising awareness?

MILLETT: I don’t think any students—no, no, no that’s not true. I knew about HIV long before Dartmouth, because, you know, really HIV busted into the national scene about 1982, 1981, when the cases really began appearing among gay men and the national news really starting about it. And I started Dartmouth in 1986, so by then, you know, the U.S. was in full-blown panic over HIV, with no real response that was

coming from the federal government because it was happening in demonized communities, from, you know, Haitians to gay men, drug users, et cetera. So there was no real response to it.

So by the time that I got to Dartmouth, there were some students who were involved in work around safer sex campaigns and condoms and teaching about HIV, and I remember going to maybe one or two of those, and they were not well attended at all. You would see maybe three other students who were there at those—at those types of events, and completely different than my experience in New York, where you would go to these types of events and there's just hundreds of people who were talking about the latest that they know about HIV or understanding about HIV, what they know about safer sex and everything else.

It was just—just very different, the priorities. You learned very quickly that the priorities of students at Dartmouth were very different than the priorities of what I considered the real world, at least for me back home in New York City.

And—and—and that was—that was always kind of shocking to me, how much more privileged it was to be cloistered from this epidemic that was taking so many lives, and so many lives of people who were just as young as the people that I went to school with.

OLACHEA: This is going off a bit of a tangent maybe, but I'm looking at the information you gave me again, and you mentioned that there was a book that influenced you? Or perhaps I read that in an interview. But I found an article in *The D* [*The Dartmouth*] from 1989, and it was Charles [A.] Murray coming to visit campus?

MILLETT: Mm-hm.

OLACHEA: And I believe he wrote *The Bell Curve*.

MILLETT: Right.

OLACHEA: And you mentioned that that was influential for you. Do you remember the visit?

MILLETT: It—it—I—I don't remember his visit in 1989. I do remember when *The Bell Curve* debate came out, and that—that book I think came out while—perhaps in the early '90s, is what I'm thinking, somewhere around then, so it was after his visit to Dartmouth. And, you know, Charles Murray, of course, is a—a professor at—I believe at Harvard [College], who's a social scientist. And this book was incredibly provocative when it came out. It was after my Dartmouth experience, but it's still influential for me.

But it was provocative in essentially saying that, you know, communities of color, particularly African-Americans, have less intellectual capacity compared to whites and that he tried to document it using really specious statistics. The thing is, though, is that, you know, if people don't understand statistics, they don't realize that the methodologies and everything that he was using was really problematic.

And I remember how infuriating that book was for—for me, for many other people in communities of color, where you actually had to defend your intelligence because a lot of that was happening at Dartmouth on a daily basis—you know, with *The Dartmouth Review* essentially saying that any students of color didn't belong there, that they probably had lower SAT scores, that we were all going to fail out of there, et cetera, which, of course, the running joke on campus was, "Yeah, but the thing was, it was people in *The Dartmouth Review* that kept failing out of school" [chuckles] —and—and didn't have their grades up to—to—to standards and everything else.

But by the time that *The Bell Curve* debate came out—that came out when I was in grad school, and I remember thinking at the time, *You know, if there is something in here that allows this man to use statistics as a way to hide and to elevate prejudice, I want to make sure that I understand statistics inside and out so that I can be able to either say, "Okay, what he's done is correct" or to refute it.*

And at the time I was in grad school for public health and eventually infectious disease epidemiology classes, and I remember how freeing it was by the time that I was done with grad school to really understand statistics, and a lot of the statistics that he used in the book, and to understand

that there were whole parts of his methodology that were wrong: The sample sizes were small. He was incorrect in the ways that he calculated error. The regression analyses were really problematic that he used or were actually the wrong types of analyses. I mean, there's a whole slew of things that were just wrong with this book.

And then—that was part of the reason that it was published as a book and not as an—in academia or an academic journal, because other academics in peer review would have caught this and said, "This is schlock." You know, "There's nothing here that's real. It's really problematic," so—but it's easier to publish it as a book because it doesn't go through that same type of peer review.

But it was really liberating and freeing after grad school to have learned statistics well enough to say, *Hey, I—I understand this now, and I understand that—how wrong this person was and how problematic the work is that—that—that—that—that he had published.* And, you know, there's just an aspect of it that was just incredible for me. Like, you were let into this secret society, as a researcher, where now you can read medical journals and all these other texts. You can understand the statistics and the methodologies that people were using. You can actually critique it and see what some of the limitations of some of the work is and whether or not the results that they're coming to, or that they believe they're coming, are actually correct.

And that was one of the things that really helped me fall in love with, you know, my future field, which was infectious disease epidemiology, and eventually becoming a scientist.

OLACHEA: Just to tie this back to Dartmouth—sorry if it seems like I'm jumping around, but—

MILLETT: That's no problem.

OLACHEA: —you're sort of capturing this dynamic and changing, like, perceptions both outside of Dartmouth and at Dartmouth in terms of, I guess, attitudes towards certain communities and awareness being raised in terms of these health issues. Could you maybe talk to me more about maybe movements

that were taking place on campus? I was reading an editorial by Michael [F.] Lowenthal [Class of 1990],—

MILLETT: Mm-hm.

OLACHEA: —and was just sort of talking about the steps that had been taken by the college, including a sexual orientation protection clause in their equal opportunities statements but also addressing the discrimination against the community that was still occurring on campus, and also faculty of color, the lack of faculty of color, but I believe it was Deborah [K.] King that became tenured during that time as well?

MILLETT: Mm-hm.

OLACHEA: Could you maybe talk a little bit more about what was going on on campus?

MILLETT: It was just such an explosive atmosphere. I mean, you know, the whole shanty incident just really exposed a lot of rifts, a lot of discontent. The degree to which Dartmouth was—it was—it was an institution and a school that many felt privileged to, that they felt it was theirs and not the domain of anybody else's. And I just remember on campus various things that were taking place.

There were debates about sexual assault and women on campus, and then there as, of course, the pushback against women, with people saying, "Well, they don't belong on campus anyway," and we should go back to being an institution that only admitted men, that, you know, "these women are nothing but agitators and, you know, hippie socialists who are all going to become lesbians anyway." I mean, the comments that you would hear were just—just crazy.

And then you would also hear things, too, in terms of immigrants and whether or not they belonged on campus and, you know, "Why do we have some of these groups here? Shouldn't they get educations elsewhere, or in their own countries? Are they really adding to diversity here?" And that was one of the big things in the 1980s, where talking about diversity and diversity in curriculums was just—it was a huge flashpoint, where people were saying, "Well, you

know, nobody wants to talk about white men who helped shape the canon," that they want to, you know, add in all these voices of women and communities of color, and that's not really the canon; this is just something to make people feel better.

And that type of debate was also taking place at Dartmouth as well, as it was on the national stage. It was just all of this, was involved with it. And, you know, part and parcel of what was taking place with Deborah King and sociology and her eventual tenure (thank God!) at Dartmouth, as well as some other faculty.

But there were also attacks on—on professors. There was a famous attack, of course, that was in the news at the time, of a music teacher, Professor [William S. "Bill"] Cole, who's African-American and was attacked by *The Dartmouth Review*. I think it was actually a physical altercation, from what I can remember. And this caused huge national news. I think that there's even some legal issues and litigation that may or may not have come out of this. Many of these students, who are, quite frankly, on Fox News today, you know, just said the craziest and the meanest things about this individual, who I believe was teaching African and Cuban percussions and other music, from what I—from what I believe. It—it was just the height of insensitivity and the height of pushback against diversity back in the '80s, and all of that was just this combustible mix at the time that I was at Dartmouth.

The other thing that was taking place then, too, was, you know, people opening questioning as to whether or not we needed the frat system and the sorority system. Is this something that really had taken its course and should evolve into something different? For—for a multiplicity of issues. And I remember, you know, with—with the—the discussions that we'd have about investments in South Africa, discussions that we'd have on racial justice and everything else, where you were trying to get other students to be involved in that, there'd be the same thirty or fifty of us on campus that would turn out.

But then when the frat and sorority system was threatened, you had *hundreds* of students come out on the Green with,

you know, megaphones and talking about, “God, this is a travesty of justice! I can’t believe you’re thinking about getting rid of these fraternities and sororities.” [Chuckles.] So it—as the coup de grâce for me, at least, was when they started playing music to, you know, get the crowd riled up, and the song that they chose was Tracy Chapman’s “Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution.” And you just couldn’t help but laugh. I thought, *oh, my God! Are you that privileged and that out of it that you really don’t understand what “Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution” is about as a song and that you would even deign to trivialize this really incredible song about your struggle to keep the frats open?*

It was—it was just—I mean, right there it crystalized me just how marked my—differently—markedly different my experiences are from the vast majority of students on campus. [Chuckles.] And I remember at that time thinking, *I either am going to stay here and have a nervous breakdown or I need to go to Yale [University] or go to Harvard [University] or go to somewhere that’s in a city, that is diverse, where people “get it,” where I can be out and where people actually value diversity and wouldn’t do something as ridiculous as playing Tracy Chapman to—to—to—to keeping the frat system open. I just need to get outta here.*

Ultimately, I didn’t, but there were several times that I came very close to just saying, *I’m—I’m done. I’m moving elsewhere.* And I remember the time there were a lot of students—there were several of us who were in that small group progressive students, who really felt like the campus was hostile towards us.

Now, people who just left—they—they had enough. They wanted to be in an environmental like Williams [College] or Brown [University] or elsewhere, that was going to be much more supportive.

The other things that I remember at that time, too, was ways that we tried to get our mental health break. And, you know, we’d either go to Boston every now and then just to get away from campus and—and to spend time, again, in the real world.

Other things that we would do is we'd go to Northampton [Massachusetts], which was close by and had a large lesbian community. And, you know, it was just great to be in an environment that was really the polar opposite of what was at Dartmouth. You know, you had an environment that was inclusive, an environment that was friendly to communities of color as well as the LGBT populations, an environment that was feminist and, you know, unabashedly so, and talking about these issues, where you would, could go to these great book readings and concerts and everything else. It was just so completely different than your experience at Dartmouth, and you're sitting there, thinking, *God, why can't I be at Mount Holyoke? Why can't I be at any of these other colleges, where —where, you know, people are having this incredible experience?*

But then you'd go back to Dartmouth and you'd have to say, *Well, but it's important for me to be here because this college is changing, and I have to be a part of this change. I have to help effect that change. There's going to be Dartmouth students coming in the future, who are going to be just like me, and I want to make sure that they don't experience the level of isolation or marginalization that I experienced on campus.*

So it was—yeah, I think quite a few of us were just having that internal struggle about where we could be, that would be far more comfortable for us, and then where we were, where it was fairly difficult, to be quite honest.

OLACHEA: Yeah. So you're mentioning sort of these divisions among different communities and individuals that—that left. Could you expand a little more—and you can let me know if this is redundant, but maybe how the gay community was inclusive or exclusive in relation to the Greek system or among gender?

MILLETT: You know, honestly, it was one of those environments where the gay community was so small—we were so small among all of us who were out—we didn't have the luxury of discriminating against one another. There were—there were just ten of us, literally, out of thousands of students who were out, so we were it. We—we had to be there to support one another.

And, you know, the other time that I saw this was when I was a grad student in North Carolina. This time I was getting my—my master's degree. And I was working in a rural part of North Carolina, where there's this huge STD [sexually transmitted disease] outbreak. And gathering information for a qualitative research study, as part of an NIH [National Institutes of Health] study, as a grad student. And one thing that I stumbled upon was this small, gay, lesbian, transgender community, in rural North Carolina. I mean, this—this just surprised me, where there is this African-American transgender woman, who would hold these events at her house, that was welcoming to the gay community. You'd have white gay men there. You'd have lesbians there.

There was a college nearby, for deaf students, and you would have deaf, gay and lesbian and transgender folks, who were at this house, as well, of this black lesbian. And then the community was so small that many people, who—who, you know, could hear perfectly well, learned sign language. And, you know, there were just—there was just no divisions. It was just shocking to me, because you saw everybody in this one house of this black trans woman, who, out of necessity, were holding onto each other and being support systems for each other, in order to survive in a very hostile rural environment.

That in some ways was what Dartmouth was like [chuckles], is that we were too small to even have those types of debates or issues or anything else. You just couldn't afford to. I mean, we were each other's support system. And—and thankfully, you know, there were other students, who were heterosexual, in communities of color, who were also supportive of us as well. And—and that certainly helps, but we were easily the minority on campus. And—and you felt it acutely every day. So I—I don't remember a lot of discord then. There could have been, but we—we just out of necessity—those types of fissures really didn't emerge.

OLACHEA: In terms of your identity, I guess I wanted to hash out a little more your different identities on campus in terms of your involvement. I'm looking at your—so you were in track and field. You were also in an organization for theater, the Black Underground Theater Association?

MILLETT: Yeah. Wow.

OLACHEA: The [Dartmouth College] Gospel Choir. How would you say all these experiences sort of like shaped your perception of your identity, and also in relation to performance, of masculinity on campus?

MILLETT: You know, I—I—I loved all of that because I grew up in an immigrant community, so it wasn't—it wasn't—it—it wasn't the same black experience as African-Americans have, which is part of the reason why I wanted to join the African-American Society and live in the African-American Society, other than the need to have bathrooms that are clean [chuckles] on Saturday and Sunday mornings, where people were not partying and vomiting all over the place. It was the only space on campus where I was, like, *This is—this is nirvana, you know, because we don't have to deal with this type of drama.*

But what I loved about it is that there's so much that I learned about, you know, the U.S. black experience that I just didn't get at home because it was not the experience of my family or my parents. And—and the Gospel Choir I think was—was helpful in that. I didn't grow up Christian. My mother is a Bahá'í. And being a part of a gospel choir gave me insights into things that beforehand I—I just didn't understand: about feeling the spirit, about you know, where some of these songs were being sung from and some of the woes and everything else that's associated with it, the joy that's associated with it, the feelings of family and how important family is, and family reunions are, particularly in black communities, in southern black communities. I learned a lot of that from—from that, which—which I really loved. And that was something that I was able to—to incorporate as part of my experience while there.

The track team. You know, there was really fantastic people on the track team, who were there. I did very well with track, as in—in—in high school and, you know, learned so much more with Coach McKenna [Archivist Note: spelling uncertain] and others while I—while I was there. I don't think I was out at the time when I was on track. It's only maybe my first two years at Dartmouth, and I came out soon after that.

But I—I really can't remember any homophobic comments that were directed at track members.

And what I liked about the track team is that it was one of those few spaces, again, at Dartmouth where it was diverse. You had black, Asian, Latino men and women who were in track, and we all worked together as a unit, so—so it was, you know, uniformly a positive experience for me.

And then, of course, the Black Underground Theater. That was with Dr. [William W.] Cook, I believe, who was an English professor at Dartmouth, African-American man, gay, older, brilliant, incredible. And he would always bring these plays, you know, from the 1950s and the civil rights movement and civil unrest among African-Americans and would juxtapose it to what was going on in the day with—under the Reagan administration.

And I—I was a part of a couple of plays there that I just really enjoyed because you could see this connection, this through-line between the black experience from the 1950s and the black experience that I was experiencing in the '80s, and seeing elements of what people experienced in the 1950s, and also, at the same time, appreciating what many of them had done for me, quite frankly, to be able to get into an institution like Dartmouth, where, you know, back in the 1950s, the possibility would have been completely foreclosed to me.

So there were all these multiple experiences that I had that I didn't necessarily have growing up in New York City, that ironically [chuckles] I was able to get at this small, cloistered, liberal arts college. And, of course, being gay was—was a part of that as well. I was a part of Tabard at the time but also had many close friends in—God, what was it called? I think it was called Phi Psi at the time [Phi Kappa Psi, now Panarchy], and then it changed to a couple of other names. I don't even know what their name is today. But it's basically where all the weird artsy kids were, you know, who—who—who—we were all labeled on campus.

And that was also incredible for me as well, just to have that experience and that community of people who also didn't quite fit in, for different reasons. I—I remember one night at

Tabard in particular, where there was this one guy, who was in our group, and everybody tried to figure out why—why is he a part of Tabard? He's not weird. You know, he's very much a preppie white male. He comes from an extremely wealthy family, and here he's been a part of Tabard for so long. It was not until his senior year that—one year he came downstairs during our meeting, our weekly meeting, and he came dressed as a woman. And he admitted to us that he's transgender and—and—and—that he knew that we never understood how we provided for support for him or why being a part of Tabard was so important for him.

But it was because he was a transgender woman who came from a wealthy military family. He, himself, was in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], and then going and enlisting in the [U.S.] Army afterwards and wanted a long military career, but, of course, all of that conflicted with his identity. And it was at that time that the pieces just fell into place for all of us, who were, like, "Oh! *This* is why you're with us." On the outside, we couldn't tell what his difference was, what it was about him that he hung out with all the—I won't say we were considered the rejects, but we were definitely the marginalized kids at Dartmouth. And we just didn't understand it, because outwardly he had everything. But then when that came to play, it was, like, "Wow! You know, we—we all have our crosses to bear. Even people from, you know, wealthy families, who look like they have everything, have their crosses to bear as well."

OLACHEA: I'll get back to—you mentioned the faculty member. You mentioned coming out. But could you further specify maybe your experiences at Tabard or what you observed in terms of it serving as a—as a space for the gay community or for non-conforming individuals?

MILLETT: Definitely. I think it was Tabard as well as Phi Psi, both places. I remember people—there was one friend of mine, Drew, who was maybe a class or two—who was younger, who had long hair, long before it was fashionable to have long hair, and pulled it back into a ponytail. Would wear makeup. Always had his fingers—fingernails painted. You know, for Drew to do any of that, he was one of those individuals who would look like a—like a J. Crew type of model. I mean, he had these classic, handsome features,

where he could easily blend into any of the frats at Dartmouth. But didn't.

And you just can't help but respect him for that, constantly wore gender-nonconforming clothing. I remember he'd be in skirts most of the time, or boots. Every now and then he would have on high heels. And, you know, it was just wonderful to see somebody who was so proudly himself in a very hostile environment, long before we talked about anything about transgender populations or gender-nonconforming identities. You know, this is the '80s. It's just that conversation wasn't happening. Being gay was considered crazy enough. But here he was, just—just living his life and doing—doing his own thing.

So it was definitely a refuge for students who were different or had different ideas, and a safe space for all of us because you—you constantly felt like you, yourself, your identity was—was under assault while you were there. And I—I am so thankful that that space was available at Dartmouth, because I—I genuinely wouldn't have stayed without it. I—I easily would have left the college.

OLACHEA: Going back to the faculty member that you mentioned, Dr. Cook, how—how was the climate, I guess, I terms of—of faculty, as far as you remember, and their identities?

MILLETT: Again, with Dr. Cook it was—it was one of those things. It was a wink and a nod. You just knew that he was family, that he was also gay. You just—you just knew. But he came from a generation that was very different, where you just didn't talk about it. You know, he was the same age as—I grew up with a godfather, who was also Panamanian, came over with my—my—my family, my parents, from Panama, who I remember as a kid—my sister and I—we would stay with him in Brooklyn [New York, NY], when my parents were working.

And this was Uncle Charles. And Uncle Charles was, you know, about the same age as Dr. Cook. And Uncle Charles sewed. He made all of his clothing. He loved to sing. Had a beautiful, high-pitched voice. Was, you know, fairly effeminate, and—and— and single. And I remember as a kid, looking at Uncle Charles and saying, *I'm just like you. I*

don't know what it is, but I remember, you know, even before the age of five, knowing that I was just like Uncle Charles. I didn't know what—what—it was intangible to me. But I still knew I was like him in some way.

And I remember when I finally came out many, many, many, many years later, that I was overjoyed. I thought I could finally have a conversation with Uncle Charles about, you know, this newfound gay identity and what it meant for me and that he and I had something in common and you can talk about it, because, you know, his generation—this was just something you did not talk about.

And that was Dr. Cook's generation. You—you knew. You just didn't talk about it. And—and that was fascinating to me, and I always wondered, *Well, how was Dartmouth like for someone like that?* You know, I was a student there. I knew I was only going to be there for four years, but this was somebody whose life was teaching and was there for many years, and he's a black gay man, who's on this campus. Where there is not many people who are like him, where he is clearly marginalized. I just wondered, *How did he do it for so many years and for so many decades?*

And there were other professors as well, who, you know, you had inklings about or you just knew that they were gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, but you---you just didn't—you didn't talk about it. At least in the '80s we didn't. I suspect that things are different now. But back then, we—we didn't.

The good thing, though, is that those professors did not—they did not divorce themselves from—from students, and particularly students who were marginalized. They were there for us, in many ways, because they understand it. They've grown up—they—they dealt with these complex identities. And they were always there to talk to, not necessarily about the LGBT issue, or if they did, it wasn't personalized, where they didn't talk about their experiences, but they were there to listen to us. And I—I—you know, I'm extremely grateful that we had those types of professors and others on campus.

And then we also had people who were allies. You know, I—I was a work-study student at Dartmouth, and I was assigned to the library there, and I remember within my first year of being there—it's easily within the first six months—there is a book that I was putting away at the library, and it was a book by Audre Lorde, and the person that I was working with was a heterosexual white woman, who had a child who was African. She—her husband was in the civil service in Africa. He passed away, and she brought her two children, as well as an adopted child, who was African, from Sierra Leone to New Hampshire. And I was essentially a big brother to him, because he needed to know other students of color.

And I became really close friends with this woman, and she knew about Audre Lorde, and she said, "You need to read Audre Lorde." She goes, "Audre Lorde really talked about these complex identities long before other people were talking about it, of being a person of color, being a sexual minority, about being a woman and just put everything into place beautifully, about how you fit and where you fit in the universe, and how important and reaffirming your life is."

And she—you know, just reading that book and getting it from Terry [Archivist Note: spelling uncertain] (God bless her; she passed away several years ago) absolutely transformed my life at Dartmouth. Up until that time, I didn't even know how to articulate all these different—these multiplicity of identifies that I had and how this all fit and—and worked. And if it weren't for Audre Lorde, then I don't think I would have been able to find a space, to understand exactly how all of this worked for me.

So there were some really incredible support systems, some who were professors, some who were staff, who had worked there, like Terry did, and then the other students, who really helped us get through a very, very difficult experience. I—I—I still marvel when I speak to friends about Dartmouth now. You know, I have these friends who just had this great experience. They look back on it, and I'm, like, *Wow, it sounds like, you know, a great adventure ride or—or something else, and it's so completely different than the*

experience I had, and you just have to wonder about that and say, *Wow.* It was a hard experience for me.

I—I—I didn't go back to the college for twenty years after graduating, and when I did go back, I was given an award. At this time, I was already at the White House. I was given an award for diversity and—and other issues, some of the work that I'd been doing in the interim. And I remember the first time that I got on campus, I started crying, because all of these emotions and this feeling of marginalization and isolation just came—it—it—just like it didn't disappear for twenty years. It came rushing back.

And, you know, my husband looked at me, and he just said, "Are you okay?" I was, like, "Yeah, there's just so much that I remember from here that—that's really important and valuable and terrific, but—but also—also sad and hurtful." So it's—it's—it's just a fundamentally different experience as an alum than other alums have had.

OLACHEA: Mm-hm. So we're sort of building up here to the point where you decided to come out when you were on campus. Could you tell me around when that was and sort of what led up to it?

MILLETT: Sure. There were a couple of gay bashings that had taken place on campus. I think there were—words were being hurled at—at some students, that was making news on campus. I think there was somebody who was actually beat up or something had happened on the bema or somewhere, where—where a gay man was hurt. And the campus was talking about these issues. And I don't remember what year it was. I think it might have been my junior year of Dartmouth. And it was also soon after that conversation that I had with a friend, who said, then, "Somebody's a faggot. I can tell from a mile away," yada yada yada, and here I am, sitting with him—that I figured that I just needed to come out.

And I remember writing a piece—it was either in *The D* or elsewhere—that, you know, Dartmouth is a diverse place, and that diversity needs to be respected, and part of that diversity is among gays and lesbians and basically coming out as a gay man. And I remember the aftermath of that piece, after it was published: a lot of people coming up to me

and just saying, “I just would never have known!” And I’m, like, “Well, what do you mean?” And they’re, like, “Well, but you’re so masculine.”

So all of these, you know, stereotypes of what gays are supposed to be just came [unintelligible], like, “You’re athletic, you’re masculine, you go to the gym. I would never have known.” I mean, just the craziest things that people were telling you. And I’m, like, “Do you want me to be in a pink taffeta tutu or something like that? Is that what you think that gay is?” It’s like, you know, it’s a range of expressions, and there’d be nothing wrong if I was in a pink taffeta tutu. It’s just—it was just—it was bizarre to me that people were so isolated that they had no idea that anybody could be gay or lesbian or transgender, that there wasn’t this-this type that was associated with it.

And I remember the time there was some stu- —there were some friends who embraced me further, and they were, like, “You know, this doesn’t make a difference at all in our friendship, and I’m so proud of you for coming out” and everything else.

And there were—there were still others who absolutely retreated. They did not want to be anywhere near me. Our friendship just died summarily because now I’m out, and, you know, back then, gay was associated with—you know, anybody could be gay. If you—if you were hanging out with someone who was gay, even if you are not, then clearly you have to be gay yourself because what self-respecting straight person would hang out with someone who’s gay? So I had quite a few friends who just stopped speaking to me completely.

At the time, I think I was being recruited by a couple of fraternities, and—this was before I joined Tabard, and I was never seriously thinking about joining any fraternity. But these were black fraternities as well as predominantly white fraternities, and by the time I came out, all those solicitations—gone. Completely dried up. And what was fascinating to me, that it even dried up among several fraternities where I knew for a fact there were a lot of gay men there, closeted gay men but a lot who were there. But now that I was out, I was radioactive. I couldn’t be

associated with their fraternity, and there was no way—it was fine with me. I didn't want to join any of them.

But it was just so interesting to see all these disparate responses as soon as you come out, that all of a sudden, you're on this other side of a veil, where now, you know, people —people are afraid of you. They're afraid that you're going to out them. They're afraid that—to be seen with you, even if they're not gay, because people are going to make assumptions about them. They're afraid that you're just, you know, this creature who might have HIV or some other infectious disease and—and—and—and give it to them. I mean, it was just—it was such a weird environment.

And I remember how liberating and, at the same time, isolating it was as soon as I made the decision to come out and—and really be among literally ten students who were GLBT identified on campus.

OLACHEA: Mm-hm. I was curious about the sort of these, like, invisible gay men at Dartmouth, like specifically in the Greek system, and maybe if you could describe sort of like the culture of that? That was an op-ed written in *The D* as well. I believe it was in 1990, around that time, of someone who had an encounter in a bathroom, and it was sort of just talking about these, like, I guess practices that had developed for people who were afraid of coming out and sort of having, like, these encounters. So what was, like, your perception on that?

MILLETT: You know, I—I—I don't know. I clearly missed out on everything [both chuckle], because I remember by the time that I graduated, several friends coming out to me who I had no idea were gay. You know, Eric [K.] Fanning [Class of 1990], who was President Obama's pick to lead the Army. Eric and I knew each other at Dartmouth. We hung out. We were good friends. I was out. Eric wasn't. And—and several other friends. And it wasn't till years later that he came out, and I—you know, you could have knocked me over with a feather. [Both chuckle.] I had no idea. It was just interesting.

And then, of course, Eric—and he was in—oh, gosh, what was the name of that fraternity? It was one of the premiere fraternities to be in, Kappa something. Now I can't remember the name. And some other students as well. And it was just

so odd for me. I was, like, *Wow!* You know, our lives are so completely different.

But there was a lot of students, a lot of friends who right after Dartmouth or years after Dartmouth came out, and, you know, part of me was really happy to find out that they were gay and that we had this shared experience, and—and—and—and that felt great.

And then another part of me, I just have to be honest, was resentful. I thought, you know, I had a hard fricking time at that college because there were so few people who were willing to be out, and here *you* were, just like me, but you were not out. And, granted, you had your own cross to bear, you know, as part of these fraternities that would have these—where people would get drunk and have these secretive hookups or other things that were taking place, all these things that I was just not a part of because—of course, I was out, and I was too radioactive. But then I just wouldn't have known about much of this stuff anyway because I wasn't in a fraternity.

But it was just a completely different subculture and world that was taking place there. I mean, I subsequently found out all these different sex webs among friends of mine, who had hooked up, who I thought were all heterosexual, who came out after Dartmouth. And I thought, *This—this is just too weird for me.*

So, you know, I think that part of me was resentful. My experience would have been qualitatively different if there were more of us who were out. And, granted, I understand that we all have our different timetables for coming out, and it's a personal choice, and everything else, but, wow! It was—it—it—it was—it was a very hard place to be gay, and it was a very hard place to be out. And it's just, I think, a shame to me that many other students didn't come out to really help improve the environment on campus. What they've done in their—with their lives since then has been fantastic, and I'm really proud of many of them, but at the time, it was—it was—it—they were not helpful for those few of us who were out. And, you know, it pains me to say that, but I—I still feel that to this day.

OLACHEA: Mm-hm. So you described yourself as radioactive, and obviously you were very outspoken on campus, and I guess it could be considered a form of activism. I'm not sure if you would have thought of yourself back then that way, of engaging in activism or simply trying to exist, but what would you say was the role that activism played during your time on campus?

MILLETT: Oh, constantly. I mean, because you—because you were marginalized, because you thought differently than other students, because you had politics that were different than other students'. You know, you just surviving or being yourself was—was—was activism. And I remember there was a phrase that was really popular at the time called "the personal is political." And that's exactly what it was, is that, you know, just your life is political.

There was even a wonderful poem that Audre Lorde had written, basically that ends with something like, you know, "Live your life to the fullest, do what you can, be who you are because you were never meant to survive." And—and—and it's true. [Chuckles.] You know, it was just—everything was intensely personal, and political, at the same time and that you had to fight for your very existence, to be recognized within this hostile environment.

And I—I—it was very clear that I was an activist. I was very clear about, you know, my stance on women, that my stance on feminism, my stance on GLBT rights, my stance on immigration and the college's reaction for South Africa. It was all clearly activist. And—and I had no apologies for it. I—I—I think that, you know, that was part of what that young man, Michael Williams, and others—that's part of what I saw in him that I really admired, that attracted me to the school, is that you couldn't help but become an activist when the very character, the very fiber of your being was being attacked every day as different or foreign or something that was not American. And, you know, in order to have any shred of dignity, you had to fight back. And I think the biggest part of fighting back was becoming an activist, absolutely.

OLACHEA: Mm-hm.

So you majored in sociology and history. How would you, I guess, look back on—on—on studying those fields as being formative and—and being a part of I guess everything that made you believe in and the individual that you became anywhere in college?

MILLETT: You know, I—I—I think there was a reason why I chose both. I mean, sociology, to really understand this outsider status that you feel both as an African-American, as a person from an immigrant family, as a gay man, just really just trying to understand: Well, what does this mean? Are there any social theories that could help explain some of these feelings that you have? You know, what is my place in society? How does this all work in terms of a constellation? And I—I think that I learned quite a bit in terms of sociology and theoretical constructs that—that—that were helpful for me.

I also think that—I'm sorry, there's going to be—[sound of a siren]—a siren coming through in the background. Sorry about that.

OLACHEA: It's okay.

MILLETT: There we go.

And then I think with history, it was just, you know, really trying to understand your place in history: How—how does history repeat itself or not repeat itself? How did we see some of these dynamics that have played out previously take place in the modern world? Where are some of the parallels? You know, do we have opportunities to diverge and to learn from what has happened in the past so—so we don't do the same thing in the future? I was just very interested in history. I thought that I was going to get a Ph.D. in history at some point.

And—and I thought that all of that really was seamless into just trying to figure out who I was. And—and—and that's what essentially college is supposed to be about, anyway. It's supposed to be that place where you really find out who you are, and you come into your own. And I'm glad that the coursework that I took, you know, gave me some context to realize that, you know, I'm not alone, first of all, that second

of all, many others have pondered these same questions that I have, and third of all, there's this body of literature and research and work that people have done on these exact subjects that, you know, you could really delve into and learn more about and—and—and grow from, and react to. And I—I thought that that was something that was just incredible for me and—and—and that Dartmouth had such amazing professors for both history as well as sociology, to help a young, struggling student with these particular issues.

OLACHEA: Mm-hm. I guess, looking back at your last years at Dartmouth, how would you say that they influenced the career that you decided to take?

MILLETT: I think by then I was—you know, I had a lot of friends who were either sick or dying from HIV, so I knew that I wanted to do something. I was already an activist by then because certainly by the time that I graduated from Dartmouth and returned home in New York City, I joined ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), to protest the government's inaction when it came to HIV.

So I think in many ways Dartmouth really primed me for the career that I had. If it wasn't for the work that I did in ACT UP, as well as the work that I did with Gay Men's Health Crisis, educating black and Latino gay men about HIV and safer sex and everything else, none of that would have led to eventually where I ended up, you know, getting a degree in public health. I thought that I was going to use by degree to continue doing some sort of community education work, and that's right after *The Bell Curve* book came out.

That's when I fell in love with science and scientific methods, and then my life changed completely, and I went into a trajectory towards infectious disease epidemiology and science and then eventually ended up at the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and did extremely well while there, becoming a national spokesperson on HIV and racial disparities and doing a lot of really important work that I published in medical journals, about racial disparities and HIV, particularly among gay men and—and what was taking place. Why were African-American gay men at such higher risk for HIV compared to other populations?

I mean, I—I see a—a completely through-line from my experience at Dartmouth in, you know, terms of trying to understand who I am, how I fit, to how I was influenced with what was taking place at home, with what I considered the real world in New York City, to becoming a scientist at CDC, trying to understand these issues and—and to provide some sort of context for the scientific community as to why we're seeing such high risks of HIV among black gay men.

And that, of course, led to me being hired by the Obama White House, where the President wanted a national HIV strategy that was based upon science. He wanted policy-based, applied science, and they were looking for a scientist who could help answer some of those questions and to help out, and they pulled me up from CDC to work in the White House for several years.

So, you know, I—I—I see all of this stemming directly from my time at Dartmouth and sort of this growing awareness of who I was, how I wanted to operate in the world and how I wanted to help with what was taking place with a lot of my contemporaries at the time.

OLACHEA: And I guess with all those experiences now, and I'm sure you've had time and I guess just thinking about different incidents at Dartmouth and—and just your experience in general, like, how—how would you say your experience or, like, your perception of your experience while you were a student and—and now, how—how they changed with—with all of these other experiences in the real world, so to speak.

MILLETT: Well, you know, what—what I love about my Dartmouth experiences: I had the experience that I looked for, that I saw with Michael Williams, an experience that would fortify me, that would make me strong, that would give me a really good sense of who I was in an early period of life and being able to take and deal with adversity head on. I find that's been helpful for me in—in many difficult environments. As a federal employee, you have to deal with uncomfortable conversations and adversity from—from the media, from others on policies that may or may not be popular, you know, and—and—and being able to—to deal with that head on when there's pressure going—going elsewhere.

I—I think that a lot of what I learned from Dartmouth has just been very helpful in—in—in my career in that regard, where I—I—I know who I am. I'm not going to bow easily to pressure. I know that I want to make an impact with the work that I do, like an impact on people's lives for the better, which is why I ended up doing a lot of HIV-AIDS work, both domestically and now internationally. And all of that really is—is this grounding that—that I received from Dartmouth, the activism that I received from Dartmouth, the affirmations from different people and groups that I received from Dartmouth.

I think one of the most powerful things for me was Michael Lowenthal graduating at the head of our class in 1990 and, you know, being friends with Mike, he was part of the weird kids, like me, who were in Tabard or I believe Psi Phi at the time, is what was called it. And I had no idea that Michael was that great a student. I had no idea. And when he was named valedictorian, I—you—you—I felt like the universe was just playing a joke on all these students who marginalized us for so long, that finally one of our own was going to be able to speak out about his experience at Dartmouth and really share what *our* experience has been.

And to be there and to sit at that commencement and to watch thousands of students and families hear from an out gay man talk about how difficult an experience Dartmouth is for communities of color, for GLBT populations, for women and what *we* encountered was one of the most empowering and gratifying things that I've ever experienced in my life.

I think the other thing that was gratifying as well around commencement is that we had an alternative commencement for a lot of students who were progressive or part of marginalized populations. And for this alternative commencement, I remember I invited Audre Lorde to come and speak, and I never expected a response. You know, she was so formative in me understanding who I was and my identity. I never expected a response. She was a huge name. She actually responded to me.

And I remember being by my mailbox, my student mailbox and getting this letter from Audre Lorde, who was explaining at the time that, you know, she has been weakened by her

treatments for cancer, for breast cancer, that unfortunately she wouldn't be able to make it but that she was touched by my letter and was so happy to see that her work has inspired a new generation of young activists. And I just—I was just—I remember being at my mailbox just practically bawling that I got this letter from somebody who—who meant so much to me in trying to understand who I was and my experience at Dartmouth.

And I remember as well that, you know, after Audre Lorde declined, that I sent a letter to Essex Hemphill, and Essex Hemphill was a black gay man living with HIV, who was doing incredible work at the [John F.] Kennedy Center [for the Performing Arts] and other places in D.C., really getting a national name for being very forthright in his poems about homosexuality, about sexuality and sex, about race and racism and just—just this incredible person who has been a beacon now for—for many black gay men. And Essex came and spoke at our alternative commencement.

So I had regular commencement with Mike Lowenthal talking about our experiences and really giving, in some ways, payback to the rest of the Dartmouth community for all the hell that many of us had gone through and giving voice to us. And then we had alternative commencement, where this incredible black gay man, who had a huge voice on a national stage, was able to have sort of this—this family gathering commencement, where we could really talk and rejoice in our various identities and experiences at Dartmouth, and the richness of it.

And—and—and that was *the* best way to end my Dartmouth career. It was—it was wonderful. It—it—it's almost, like, you know, living long enough to see this revenge or this light at the end of the tunnel, and it really happened. It just wrapped up beautifully in a bow with these two incredible commencement experiences.

OLACHEA: Was there any, I guess, backlash or just any other reactions from your classmates or anyone present at commencement after he spoke?

MILLETT: Oh, absolutely, when Mike Lowenthal spoke, absolutely.

OLACHEA: Yes.

MILLETT: And if people look at any of the Dartmouth alumni magazines or *The Daily D* from—I think we graduated May 10th from Dartmouth, in 1990. Soon afterwards, in *The Daily D*, you saw a lot of editorials about "How can we let this—this—this, you know, degenerate speak at your commencement?" "How is it possible that—that this gay man was our valedictorian of our school? And how it "sullied the image of our school" and "how dare he use this as an opportunity to talk about his experiences, rather than talking about the experiences of the whole Dartmouth community?"

There were alumni who were threatening not to give money to the college any longer because they allowed somebody like this, of this caliber, to speak. There was—it—it—it happened—there was a lot of backlash for a long period of time after that. Mike's speech, if you have an opportunity to read it or to get it, was just wonderful, absolutely foundational for explaining how Dartmouth needs to do more to grow up and to own up to the fact that there's a bigger world that's out there, that's far more diverse and far more complicated than this environment, this idyllic environment that at the time existed there.

It was—it was just wonderful. And I reveled in reading every single one of those letters, in the backlash [chuckles] and everything else—

OLACHEA: [Chuckles.]

MILLETT: —from essentially these people who—you know, I won't say that they're Neanderthals, but these people who led such cloistered lives that they really believed that Dartmouth and its experience was only their privilege, only something for them, to realize that it's something that they actually have to share with other people who are very different from them but are nonetheless Dartmouth as well. It was just so affirming, incredibly affirming

OLACHEA: One last question just to tie this up: What made you want to participate in SpeakOut?

MILLETT: You know, I—there's a part of me that still feels a twinge of guilt that I haven't done a lot since Dartmouth, because I know that I benefited from Dartmouth, not only personally but I benefited in terms of, you know, having the name Dartmouth on your résumé and the doors that it's opened for me subsequently in my career, and I've just had this fantastic career, that I felt the need to—to give back in some ways and—and—and to make sure that there is this history that's preserved about what life was like then, to talk about the nuances, the complications of being a Dartmouth student for—particularly among students of color, that sometimes you don't hear enough about that.

And—and—and I wanted to make sure that that was there, that it wasn't all sweetness and light and, you know, living in the middle of this rainbow fantasy with Mickey Mouse, that there was—there was a really difficult environment for quite a few of us. And I wanted to make sure that that perspective was shared as part of an oral archive, and I'm—I'm glad that I've had an opportunity to do so.

And I hope, too, that, you know, students, current students would be able to find some parallels with *their* own stories and—and realize that things were probably really bad then and are now much better, but there are still certain things that perhaps are the same, that I'm hoping that *they* can take on and change with the college eventually, to—to get to where we need to be in genuinely recognizing and reveling in the differences that—that we have.

So I'm—I'm just glad that I had an opportunity to—to speak, to provide perhaps a perhaps nuanced perspective on—on my time at Dartmouth.

And—and I think as well, too, and perhaps this would be the last point, is that it probably gives some healing for me because it was such a difficult experience, very hard experience, that—to provide some sort of sense of closure on—on—on this incredibly formative and powerful experience—I mean, powerful enough that I didn't go back to the college in twenty years. It says something, that I can now talk about it, that I can be proud of it, that I can reflect on it and—and—and—and that I can perhaps move on and—and just say this was a part of my life that was important. It was

both good and bad, but it was important, and I'm glad that I experienced it.

OLACHEA: Well, thank you. Thank you so much for—for sharing all of this. I can definitely say I see some commonalities and some parallels. Was there anything else you wanted to add?

MILLETT: No, no, that's it. I'm looking forward to hearing more once these and others get published. I'm looking forward to listening to all of these stories and seeing how they're going to be stored and highlighted and formatted, but I'm—I'm so happy that you and others are doing this project. And it's really cool to speak to another student now [laughs], whose there many years after that I was there, who, you know, has definitely, probably understands what I'm talking about and—and—and where there's definitely some parallels and, I'm sure, new challenges that were not present while I was there.

So, you know, kudos to you for doing this. Kudos to you and your contemporaries for really trying to make Dartmouth a better place, and I'm—I'm just happy that you're being a part of this as well.

OLACHEA: Thank you.

[End of interview.]