NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

PAULINE PARK

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

Date of Interview: March 9, 2017 and April 13, 2017

Location of Interview: Queens Pride House, Jackson Heights, Queens, New York

Transcribed by Joel Ruffier

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #012

Nadia Awad: Hi, my name is Nadia Awad and I'm recording an oral history with Pauline Park as part of the New York Trans Oral History Project with New York Public Library. And I'm at Queens Pride House and it is March 9, 2017. Alright, thank you. Okay, so I'm just going to start. If you could introduce yourself and just tell me who you are?

Pauline Park: So I'm Pauline Park. I am probably best known as an activist here in New York. Probably best known for having led the campaign for the transgender rights law that was enacted by the New York City Council in 2002. I am an activist, a writer, and also part-time student now. And I co-founded Queens Pride House, the LGBT community center in the borough of Queens, where we are sitting right now, in January 1997. I am president of the Board of Directors. I served as executive director for three years until July—from May 2012 until July 2015. I continue to serve as the coordinator of the transgender support group here at Queens Pride House.

Awad: So I'm just going to hold this here—it'll, I mean—

Park: Okay, so I don't have to get too—

Awad: Oh no, you don't have to get too close, so you don't have to be uncomfortable. I mean it can pick up my voice. I just did that, so they have an intro marker.

Park: When I did the interview with Schuyler [Swensen], the staff person was sitting near us and said that my "Ps" were too plosive.

Awad: Oh, well that's something that you can fix in audio editing software [laughter].

Park: There you go.

Awad: So how did you get involved in the work that you do now? What was your point of entry? Because you just listed a lot of organizations and you know...

Park: Well, my activism actually started here in New York but the organization that I—the first organization I co-founded was in Chicago. So, to explain. I lived in Chicago for five years from 1983 to 1988, and then for another year from '94 to '95. In the summer of '94, in June '94, I came to New York for the Stonewall 25 Celebration, commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. And I attended a conference which I'd just found out about through the magic

of email, which was entirely new at that time, called the Rice Conference which was entirely organized by GAPIMNY, Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York. And It was primarily for gay Asian men. And, at the time I was gay male identified—this was before I transitioned, and in the course of the conference, I attended a workshop and met three people who had become friends of mine who are gay Asians in Chicago and they were very frustrated with the Asians and Friends Chicago group that they were a member of. Which, not to put too fine a point on it, was basically a rice queens club for white men who are interested in Asians. And so I had just said to them, why don't you start a new group? And so we worked together and we co-founded [door opens]—
Unidentified: Sorry, my jacket.

Park: Oh, yeah, go ahead. Oh, no problem, no problem. It'll give me a chance to take a sip of water. No problem. Nice to meet you, Enrique. [pause] So in the course of this conference I attended a workshop with these three gay Asian men who became friends of mine. And when we got back to Chicago, we co-founded a group called Gay Asians and Pacific Islanders of Chicago, GAPIC. And that—I was involved with the group—I was the chair of the group, the first chair of the group from September '94 until June '95. I moved to New York in July '95. And so that was my first experience with activism. I also was invited to serve on the Board of Directors of the Asian American AIDS Foundation of Chicago, which I did for a year. When I moved to New York, I joined GAPIMNY, as a member, and actually ended up being on the steering committee in 1999 and 2000. But before that, I was invited to co-found Queens Pride House. There were some preliminary meetings in 1996, but our first board meeting was in January 1997. And I was elected the first secretary of the Board of Directors and served on the board in different installments from January '97 through May '99. Then came back onto the board in 2001, when we opened our first site, which was a storefront on Woodside Avenue in Woodside. Left the board a few years later, then came back in April 2010, to the Board of Directors. By that point, Queens Pride House had moved to this site on 37th Avenue in Jackson Heights. I became president, was elected president of the board in July, at the end of July in 2010. And became very much involved with the management of the organization. And then became even more involved when I was appointed executive director, acting executive director, in May 2012. And served as executive director until July 2015. I was the first and only openly transgender executive director of an LGBT community center, in the city or the state—actually still, I'm the only one. And was one of only two in the entire country at that time.

Awad: Where was the second?

Park: In Racine, Wisconsin, believe it or not.

Awad: Wow.

Park: Yeah, there is a very small community center there. But I was the only transgender woman of color who is executive director from the LGBT community center at the time. And I don't know of any that have been since then—I don't think there have been—as far as I know there haven't been any transgender women of color that have been executive director of LGBT community

centers. I might add, parenthetically, that I organized the first, and so far only, forum on pinkwashing and Israeli occupation and apartheid hosted and organized by an LGBT community center anywhere in the country, as far as I know, ever. And there's a reason for that [laughter]. But that was in June 2013 and Sarah Schulman and I were the speakers and facilitators. The other organization that I most closely associated with was NYAGRA, the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy, which I co-founded in June 1998. And the campaign that we're best known for was the campaign for the transgender rights bill, which was introduced in 2000 and was enacted in April 2002. We kicked off the campaign for the bill, which was introduced in June 2000, at a press conference in February 2000. And that was in some ways my coming out as a public person, as a public figure. It was not something that I had particularly sought to be perfectly honest. I was perfectly happy being a private person. But it was a necessary part of running the campaign for the bill. And running a legislative campaign was not only an extraordinary honor in some ways and a privilege, it was also an extraordinary education in real politics. I did my PhD in political science. But to be perfectly honest, academic political scientists are the last people I would turn to for insight about politics. There is what they call book learning and there is real education which is what you get when you actually get involved with policy making and politics. I co-founded a number of other organizations. They were all relatively short-lived but they all had an impact in their own way. I co-founded a group called Iban/Queer Koreans of New York [Iban/QKNY] in January 1997 and led that group as coordinator until May 1999. Sadly after I stepped down, the group basically fell apart. And didn't survive the Christmas party in December 1999. I co-founded a group, two political clubs—one was called OUTPocPac, Out People of Color Political Action Club, which was the first political club by and for queer people of color in New York. And [I] served as the last co-president of that organization before it kind of faded out. I also co-founded a group—political club called Guillermo Vázquez Independent Democratic Club of Queens—Vázquez with two z's, V-Á-Z-Q-U-E-Z—in 2002. Sadly that political club only lasted about two years as well but both Vázquez, GVID as we call it, the Guillermo Vázquez Independent Democratic Club of Queens and OUTPocPac, did actually have an impact in their brief lives. And I think Iban/QKNY did as well.

Awad: So I have a question—you've done a lot of work to organize—or to organize and create space for LGBT Asian Americans and I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what are some of the issues in your experience that these communities face and why it's important for them to have their own space?

Park: Well I think LGBT queer APIs [Asian and Pacific Islanders] face challenges, some of which they have in common with other communities of color, others of which are more unique. I think the diversity of the queer API community is both a strength and a challenge, because we don't all speak Asian [laughter]—there is not one language that all Asians speak, and it is not Chinese either. So within the community, not only is there a startling diversity of cultures of origin from the Asian Pacific region—I mean to give you an example, while in the United States most people think of East Asians when they think of the term Asian, In the U.K., I lived in London for two years, people first think of South Asians. And both East Asians and South Asian populations are incredibly diverse. There are over 700 languages spoken on the Indian subcontinent alone. So there is incredible diversity of language, of culture, of religion, of class, and also interestingly

enough of sexual orientation and gender identity. I developed a presentation a few years ago which is very long and academic title— Proto-Transgenderal & Homoerotic Traditions in Pre-Modern Asian & Pacific Islander Societies, which sounds like the title of a dissertation. It's not nearly that long and it's much more readable. But it's a basically meant to be about a half-hour long presentation on pre-LGBT identities, pre-twentieth century queer identities and practices in the Asian Pacific region before the twentieth century. And one of the important points about the queer API community is, in my view, the need to rearticulate queer API identities in a way that is not part of the dominant discourse within the LGBT community, which is very much articulated by gay white men, non-transgender or cisgender gay white men. And the important point there is that queer APIs, all too often, if they come out at all as LGBT, it's within the LGBT community, the white dominant LGBT community. So all too often, other Asians—and this is very true in Asian immigrant communities in the U.S.—and the queer APIs themselves often articulate and understand their LGBT identities in ways that are very much part of the white dominant discourse within the LGBT community in the United States. So one project that I've had, which is expressed in some ways through this presentation, is to attempt to help educate queer APIs as well as others who are non-LGBT or non-Asian, about this very long history of people that we would call LGBT or queer in pre-modern Asian and Pacific Islander societies. So that we're not viewed as foreigners within both Asian ethnic communities and also within the white dominant LGBT community within the United States. One of the challenges that GAPIMNY and Q-Wave—which is the group for queer women and trans folk—and SALGA, South Asian Lesbian Gay Association, face and that Iban/QKNY faced is the fact that any Queer API group in this country will really be serving two rather distinct constituencies. One is more recent immigrants, for whom English is not their first language, and the other is English-speaking Asian Americans. And those two groups have rather different needs in many ways. And when I was coordinator of Iban/QKNY, that very much came to the fore. One of the things that we tried to do for a while was to have bilingual meetings, meaning that the meetings were twice as long because everything had to be said in both English and Korean. And the balance would tend to shift from meeting to meeting—one meeting might tend to have more Korean speakers and one meeting might tend to have more English speakers. And so that was a challenge, and there was also the gender challenge—I mean Iban/QKNY was multi-gendered. And that was a challenge because both in Korea and in other Asian societies there is a considerable sex segregation particularly in childhood and youth. Boys and girls are often virtually raised separately in some ways and so there's a challenge bringing together gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, people who don't identify with the binary and genderqueer folk, even if they have a common ethnicity. So I think that's a distinct challenge. I was born in Korea but adopted by European American parents, so I never learned to speak Korean—I'm studying it now—but because of that, I've never felt in a position really to talk to Korean language media. I have on occasion, but they generally want Korean speakers or people who are perfectly bilingual, and so that's a challenge there. I will mention, what was one of the great experiences of the last few years, which was I went "back" to Korea in June and July 2015 for the first time since I was adopted at the age of seven-and-a-half months old. I always put "back" in quotes because it sounds odd given that I have no memories of the country from my earliest days because I was seven-and-a-half months old when I came here to the U.S. But in any case, I went back to Korea in June and July 2015—I had four speaking engagements and the biggest was the Queer Korea Festival Seoul Pride Parade. I was invited to speak at the festival.

There, they do the festival before the parade or the march, which is reverse of most parades in American cities. And I've spoken to big audiences before, but that was by far the largest—the crowd was estimated to be over 35,000 people and it was the largest event in the history of the queer community in Korea up until that point. The only one larger was the festival and parade the following year in June 2016. And it was a fantastic experience. I had three other speaking engagements. One was a very small meeting with a new transgender advocacy project called Jogakbo, which means patchwork quilt. Another was meeting attended by over 50 people that was hosted by the HaengSeongIn, which was the leading LGBT advocacy organization in Korea. I think their title is usually rendered in English as Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights in Korea. And the fourth speaking engagement was with the Palestine Peace and Solidarity Group in South Korea, where I gave a presentation on my participation in the first U.S. LGBTQ Delegation Tour of Palestine back in January 2012, which we went on together. And that was really exciting, it was great to get to know the Palestine Solidarity activists in Korea, who have their own specific and unique challenges. There were about 35 people in attendance which they said was a really good turn out there. From what they tell me, it's very difficult to get Koreans interested in Israel-Palestine as an issue. In general, the Korean news media are focused almost exclusively on East Asia; South Korea, North Korea, Japan, China. And they might report on what goes on in the U.S. as well, particularly in the Korean American community. But the Middle East, Israel-Palestine, is a faraway country of which most Koreans know very little. And in fact, apparently, the Korean activists were telling me that when they talk about Palestine, there was a lot of confusion because sometimes Koreans will say, "Are you talking about Pakistan?" Also there is confusion because there are a lot of—sort of love hotels and they have the word "palace" in them. So if they say we're having a meeting about Palestine, Koreans might think they're talking about a love motel.

Awad: Wow.

Park: Yeah. [laughter]

Awad: Wow.

Park: Palestine, the love motel of the Middle East.

Awad: It sort of is [laughter]. I wanted to just ask a question—when you were in Korea as a trans woman, can you tell me a little bit what it was like to meet other trans women who grew up in Korea and what are—what was that experience like for you?

Park: Well, meeting other trans women there was fantastic. There aren't a lot. It's still extremely difficult to be openly LGBT. It's far more difficult being openly transgender than being openly gay. Until recently, most trans women, as in most countries unfortunately, were really either closeted or largely confined to the sex industry in some fashion because of pervasive discrimination. I met a transgender activist there, who actually was working in the construction industry. Doesn't get more butch than that, right? She had served in the military—all young men are required to serve three years of military service in the Republic of Korea. But she finally just felt a desperate need to live her authentic life. So she actually came out to her parents which is a really big thing to do.

And her parents are relatively accepting and so she has transitioned. But there's only a very small number or handful of openly transgender women in Korea, and even fewer trans men. It was great connecting with them. It made me think of my own story in some ways because the truth is, when I was adopted in 1961, Korea was still the poorest, or one of the two or three poorest countries on Earth. And as an orphan, my prospects for social advancement were probably close to zero anyway. But even now it's difficult in 2017, but growing up queer in Korea in the 1960s and 70s? What prospect would there have been, really? Which is not to suggest that life has been just a bowl of cherries here in the U.S. either, facing considerable racial animus as well as homophobia and transphobia here in the U.S. But I do think that I probably had many more opportunities here despite the challenges of having grown up in a Christian fundamentalist family, on the all-white southside of Milwaukee.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Can you tell me a little bit about, you know, growing up in Milwaukee—give me a sense of what—a sense of that place for you as a child?

Park: Well, you know, it's funny because Milwaukee was one of the most segregated cities in the country and one of the least diverse when I was growing up in the 60s and 70s. I'm now living in Jackson Heights, which demographers have determined may be the well most diverse spot on planet Earth. So I've gone from one extreme to another. I was adopted by European American parents. My father was second-generation Norwegian. My mother was fourth-generation German American. For one thing—and my brother and I were adopted together—and our grandmother was our third parent. One difference was frankly the age difference because my parents were considerably older than the parents of my most of my peers, growing up. My mother was born in 1916. She'd be 101 [years old] if she were alive today. My father was born in 1912. And my grandmother, who was in many ways as much our parent as our father was, was born in 1888. So I was raised partly by someone who was born in the 19th century. So maybe that gives me a slightly different perspective in and of itself. My parents were not just "Sunday Christians," they really were true believers, they were true Christian fundamentalists. And so coming out of that background also gives me maybe a different perspective on what's going on in contemporary U.S. politics from friends who grew up in more liberal households and more diverse communities than I did. My parents were rock-ribbed Republicans. My mother once said that the only mistake that she had made in her life was voting for FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] in 1932 [laughter]. Which she did as an act of rebellion against her parents [laughter]. My father and mother met during World War II. My father served in Europe in WWII; he saw combat. And he was in the U.S. third army, in a battalion, which helped liberate three concentration camps. I did a little research recently and found out that—found out the names of the three camps. One of them was actually a subcamp of Buchenwald, which is one of the two Nazi concentration camps that I actually visited when I was living in Germany. I visited Buchenwald and Dachau. And I think one of the things that really informs my work is both the historical perspective and also the importance of understanding that one form of oppression or one genocide can't possibly justify another. So I think on the one hand, we have to remember the Holocaust but we have to understand the lessons of the Holocaust, the real lessons. And at the same time, not only remember the Nakba, but recognize that the Nakba is an ongoing process and the ethnic cleansing of historic Palestine is continuing to this day. We see the ethnic cleansing of East

Jerusalem, as well as the West Bank and the incremental genocide in Gaza as a noted Israeli historian calls it. So growing up, reading history was my favorite thing. Books and maps and atlases were a big thing growing up. I mean we did have—my brother and I did have a few toys that were a little bit more gendered—our parents would not obviously buy us Barbie dolls or anything feminine identified, so we got G.I. Joes, matchbox cars, and boy toys.

Awad: Did you want more feminine toys or...?

Park: Not so much the toys. My cousin had a pair of glittery high-heel shoes, you know like little play shoes, princess shoes. And when I went over to her house, I would try them on when no one was in the room. So I did kind of covet her glittery princess shoes. But I wasn't so much, the toys—I wasn't so much into feminine—stereotypically feminine toys or the whole princess thing. My brother and I would play with Legos. We had a lot of not very gendered toys and I think maps were my favorite thing. I'm super into it and if anyone follows me on Facebook or Pinterest, I post maps every day—I'm fascinated by maps. And history, I read more history than anything else. So, but growing up was interesting. My brother and I were the only non-white children, not only in our family but in our grade school and in the neighborhood as well.

Awad: And can you talk to me a little bit about you know what it was like to have parents who, you know you've described as being so conservative, adopt two Korean children? What was that...

Park: Well, you know, my parents had very little formal education. My mother had to drop out of high school at the age of sixteen because she had nephritis, she lost one kidney. And she was basically—she had significant disabilities all of her adult life. And my father only had one year of college but it wasn't even really—it was kind of like a vocational school really. So neither of them had much formal education. My mother came from a very poor working class family. My father's family was just barely lower-middle class. His parents had emigrated from Norway in 1883 and 1887. His father had a variety of different jobs. None of them were exactly what we'd call professional; he was an insurance salesman at one point, for example—my paternal grandfather. My father was technically management, but he never made a lot of money.

Awad: So you were more working class?

Park: We were—well, on the cusp of working class and lower-middle class. And even within our family, we really grew up with our mother's family. My father's family was very small and was in Chicago and our mother had an older brother and three younger sisters. And of her siblings, I would say that her brother ended up very upper-middle class; he was the only really prominent member of the family. He was a minister and then he became a judge. But my mother's other sisters—two of them I describe as middle-middle class and the other was very working class. She married a very working class man. And so our family was really on the cusp of working class and middle class. Our mother's background was very middle class, she grew up very poor. And as I say, my father's family was just barely lower-middle class, even if his sisters had pretentions to more bourgeois status. And when our father died, I was 12 going on 13, and it really plunged us

into poverty. So we spent our teen years in a kind of gentile poverty, we were basically living off of social security survivor benefits. Our mother and grandmother had social security, and our mother had veteran's benefits from our father's service in World War II. So we didn't really have the bourgeois niceties and advantages that many of our peers did. Our neighborhood was sort of lower-middle class, sort of borderline middle-middle class, and the only bourgeois luxury we really had growing up was private piano lessons. There was a sort of stereotypical piano lady teacher in our neighborhood that we went to. Fortunately, she was really good, she was really good. And even though the lessons were pretty cheap, we—my brother and I had a really firm foundation for piano. So actually I revived my pianism ten years ago, after not having played twenty-five years. I even recorded a CD, you have my CD right?

Awad: Yes, yes. I do. It's nice.

Park: And that's one of my greatest joys actually, music. So I think you know when I look back on it, I think, yeah, it is kind of strange that I have this background and here I am identifying as an openly transgender woman doing progressive, even radical, activism here in New York, living in Jackson Heights, when I grew up in this Christian fundamentalist household in a white neighborhood on the southside of Milwaukee. I went back to Milwaukee a few years ago for my 35th high school anniversary reunion. And it was the first time I had seen most of my classmates since I had graduated in 1978. And what was interesting about it was, most of my classmates from my class of '78, stayed in Milwaukee or southeastern Wisconsin, and I've gone the furthest both geographically and I think in every other respect too. I think if I—if they'd had a contest for most changed, I probably would have won it. [laughter]

Awad: And how was it for you—why did you want to go back to the reunion? And how was it to be there? Why was that important for you?

Park: Well, other than my brother and two classmates, who are now openly gay men—one lives in Wisconsin, one lives in Washington, D.C. I had met up with only four other classmates, four women who were in my class, class of '78, several years ago, this was over ten years ago. But just briefly. Four of them on one occasion, and one of them a second time—in Chicago. But other than them, I had actually not seen any of my classmates since 1978, you know, for thirty-five years. And to be perfectly frank, I was just curious to see if the football players were all fat and bald. You know, the usual thing. And... [laughter]

Awad: And were they?

Park: A few of them—a few of the cheerleaders too. [laughter]

Awad: [laughter]

Park: But it was strange? And unsettling, but also kind of wonderful in a way. It was kind of my coming out to my class because, as I say, except for a handful of them, I had not had any contact with them. And most of them were very nice, I—one woman there told me that she had heard

someone make a snide comment about me. But other than that secondhand report, people were perfectly nice. There had been previous reunions, there'd been a 10th and a 20th, but I hadn't gone to them. So to be perfectly frank, it was as much to satisfy my own curiosity. And some people were actually extremely supportive. I think what struck me—I mean, I hadn't really kept in touch with most of them since then. I mean I friended some of them on Facebook and we've had a little contact on Facebook but I haven't seen any of my classmates since then. This was a few years ago. And it's interesting, the passage of time—what struck me, and I don't say this with any sense of pride, but I was struck by how different my life is from theirs. Because most of them really are living rather bourgeois and heteronormative lives that are not that different from their parents. I mean they may be on social media, they may have Facebook and Twitter accounts, but how different are they from their parents? Probably not that different. Whereas my life is totally different from my parents. I've lived abroad, I've traveled, I've lived in New York for three years. I'm an activist—none of them are involved with activism or politics in any way as far as I know. So I think that's what struck me. I went back to the old house that I grew up in, my brother and I call it the "old house." And it's interesting because if you grow up in a house, you live in a house from the age of seven-and-a-half months till just before you turn eighteen, but you don't set foot in that house for, you know, over twenty-five years, the first time you go back, it's rather an intense experience. And the first thing I was struck by, frankly, was how small it was. Because when we were growing up, I was always thought of it as "Oh, this big house!" But I went back and I thought, "Oh, this is a little doll's house." But I've grown up a little bit since then, you know. When you're two feet high, it looks much bigger than when you're 5'6". And I went back with Larry Tung for a film that he made about my life and work. And he had since made a second film, and that second film was about my trip back to Korea in 2015. And so both of the films required me to speak on camera about my past which compels one to reflect on one's life in a way that's rather—that's rather interesting. And I don't regret any of the experiences that I've had because I've learned a huge amount from all of them. And so for me, it's been a process of growth and change. There are things one doesn't anticipate in life. I mean, I always knew I was transgender, but I didn't know exactly how I would actualize that gender identity. But I—

Awad: But you knew as a child?

Park: Oh yeah, I knew from the age of four. I've always known. But knowing and doing something about it are two different things.

Awad: When you had that awareness as a child, how did you make sense of it? Or how did you deal with it, I guess? And especially as an adolescent.

Park: Well, I think I was precocious enough to know that it wasn't something that I could discuss with my family. And so on the relatively rare occasions that I was home alone, and it was pretty rare when the rest of the family was out. I might've been sick on a few occasions and not gone to church, otherwise we were always expected in church. Our father was an elder in the church, and we actually had to sit in the front pew—one of the two front pews. So we were always kind of on display. I would—on a few rare occasions, I would sneak into my mother's closet and try on her clothes. But they didn't fit me, I was a small Asian child and she was this stout German

hausfrau. I would try on her muumuus and her house dresses. She was not a fashion plate, but so her pantyhose were the only thing that fit me actually. So I knew that my core gender identity was feminine. Now the sexuality part really didn't happen until I turned twelve. And then puberty hit, and all of that. I think—you know, some children are more sexual than others, but I think before the age of twelve, I'm not sure there was a sexuality? There was definitely gender identity. But then during adolescence, sexuality kind of superseded gender identity for several years. And in any case, it was much easier to come out as gay than it was as transgender back then than it is today, but it certainly was back then. I should mention that in my junior high and high school, there was no such thing as being openly gay. I remember in junior high that there was one boy who was rather femme and he was always being bullied. And that was not something that one wanted. Now, I was occasionally bullied as well because I was extremely feminine, but I tended to try to keep my head down, bury myself in books, and also music. My brother and I studied violin, as well as piano. We got violin lessons at school. The Milwaukee public school system at the time had a really good music program. And we were in the orchestra and the chamber orchestra, in junior high and high school. And we also played in a youth orchestra, a city-wide youth orchestra called Music For Youth. And I also—my brother did not, but I actually started organ lessons—I had private organ lessons with an organist at another local church. It's funny to think back on it because I don't know if I realized when I started studying with him, but certainly years later it was clear to me that he was gay. And the funny thing is, my mother first wanted me to become a Lutheran minister but then when that didn't pan out, then she thought about my being an organist. Which is ironic, little did she know that most organists are gay. Straight women and gay men, right, just like librarians. So my organ teacher was a bachelor, a confirmed bachelor, and was always delighted to see me, to give me a lesson. And he was a brilliant organist actually. He was a superb performer as well as a really good teacher. I continued organ and piano lessons in college. I stopped violin. I wasn't bad in the context of my junior high and high school orchestras but I was no Jascha Heifetz. And in any case, string technique never really came naturally to me. It's just not natural sticking a piece of wood under your neck and taking another piece of wood and sawing on it. Whereas piano, as you sit down at a keyboard, you're in a very natural posture, right? I think when I was in high school, I had a very limited imagination when it came to careers. I could only think of two—one was in music and one was in journalism. And I had dreams and fantasies of becoming either a symphony violinist or a concert pianist. You know, now that I know what those are all about it's probably good that I didn't pursue those, because so few people make it to the top. I can play what I want, as an amateur pianist, in a way that a professional pianist can't. If you're a professional pianist, there are certain things that you have to do to advance your career. So music is a great avocation, rather than a vocation. Anyway, I went off to University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I declared as a pre-journalism major, but I switched majors when I discovered how totally insipid the other journalism majors were. And switched majors to philosophy, which was hardly the most practical vocational major. But it was really perfect for me. I had always been interested in these big questions—I still am. The group that I've been a member of the longest is a group called the Philosophy Forum, which I actually coordinated for several years. Which is an LGBT discussion group that meets in Manhattan and discusses philosophy. And I've been a member of that group since 1997. I've been a member of that group for twenty years. So in any case, I had majored in philosophy. My senior year, I did a study abroad program in London through the University of Wisconsin system. I absolutely fell in love with the

city and stayed for a second year. I applied to and was accepted by the London School of Economics and Political Science and did a master's there in European studies. And that was fascinating. It was a challenge. Studying for the comprehensive exams and writing a master's thesis were very big challenges for me. I really had to develop some discipline, which—I had a degree of discipline as an undergrad, but not at that level. I wrote my master's thesis on French economic policy under the Mitterrand administration.

Awad: Can I back up a little bit?

Park: Sure!

Awad: And just ask you, you know, what was it like—I know you did a lot of studying and you're obviously very passionate about certain subjects, but I'm wondering, what was it like for you as a student? When you think about your student life at University of Wisconsin-Madison, what was it like to be there? Did you...

Park: Well, it was fascinating, I mean first of all, the University of Wisconsin-Madison is one of the great land-grant institutions of the U.S. I hope it remains so, even if Scott Walker seems intent on destroying it—the Republican governor of Wisconsin. I came out in my first semester, as gay. There were no openly transgender people on campus, or in town. There was a small but growing gay and lesbian community; mostly gay men with a smattering of lesbians.

Awad: When you say you came out, did you come out to your peers, to your family? To—how did that...

Park: Well, I came out to my brother and then he came out to me, later, as gay. I did not come out to my family, that's kind of a very long story. I—I was pretty out as a student. I had a few boyfriends, successively, not at the same time, not simultaneously. And got involved with the local gay community there. Could not be called an LGBT community. There was no infrastructure on campus, as there is now. There was one little gay center, which was the volunteer project that was run by basically gay grad students and they had a little office in the basement of the Episcopal church across the street from campus. One of the grad students ran a support group, which was mostly undergrads. The university was enormous, it still is. When I was there, there were over 35,000 students. I think it was probably close to 40,000 students. And it was a fantastic experience in so many ways. For the—I mean Madison is only 150,000 metro area, as opposed to Milwaukee, which is about 1.5 million metropolitan. But Milwaukee is very—you know, this white ethnic, kind of blue-collar town. It's like a gigantic small town. The stereotype of Laverne and Shirley actually is not that far from the truth, in some ways. Whereas Madison, even though it's a tenth of the size of Milwaukee, it's actually quite diverse. Both because of the university, and the state capital. And it was an enormously liberating experience. It was a great educational experience. And— I was not political at the time, but I had a boyfriend who was.

Awad: Can you tell me what you mean by that?

Park: I wasn't an activist, and I wasn't involved with politics but Madison has, for a very long time, had a reputation as being a very political campus. It's called the Berkeley of the Midwest. It was a hotbed of anti-war activism during the Vietnam War. When I got to campus in August '78, the big issue on campus was the shah of Iran. There were demonstrations almost every day in the central square on campus, against the shah. And I would observe them, but I wasn't an activist or involved politically. My boyfriend or lover at the time was involved with gay activism. And in fact, actually helped lead the campaign for the gay rights bill. That was ultimately passed by the Wisconsin state legislature. Which was the first gay rights law enacted by a state legislature in the country. So maybe a little bit of his political activism rubbed off on me in terms of many conversations, but I wasn't involved with any kind of activism at the time. But—I just have to see if this person is coming through the room—

Awad: Hold on one second.

Park: You have to run out the door—And then LSE, the London School of Economics is so international that more than half the students, when I was there and it's true today, were non-British students.

Awad: May I ask a question?

Park: Sure!

Awad: Had you traveled outside of the U.S. before your time in London?

Park: I'd only been to Canada, I don't know if western Canada counts. [laughter] Not really...

Awad: [laughter]

Park: So going to London, you know, this huge enormous city of over ten million people, which is enormously international and cosmopolitan—

Awad: Did you have culture shock?

Park: I did, I did. But maybe in a good way? I had a few boyfriends in succession. And it was—it was an amazing experience, in so many ways. And while I was not an activist there in London either, it was a political education in many ways. I was there from '81 to '83 when Margaret Thatcher was at the height of her power. I was actually there for the Falklands War which took place in '82, the Summer of '82. I actually saw Margaret Thatcher live once from a distance—walking into Westminster Abbey. And I followed politics very closely, British politics. I was there for the general election in 1983. Margaret Thatcher won an enormous majority of over a hundred.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about what the atmosphere of London for you was like at that time?

Park: It was fantastic. Well, first of all, it for the first time I started to go out dressed as a woman in public, which was one of the most liberating experiences I've ever had. This was—my second year, I moved in with my then lover—that's a very 70s term, right? Lover, boyfriend, whatever. Nowadays we'd say partner, which to me sounds like you're in business together, you know? But in any case, I was living with my then lover or boyfriend or partner, in East Acton in West London and I discovered a transgender support group. Which was harder to do in those days because this was long before the internet—so how did you find out about these things, right? But I discovered this support group that met at this kind of falling down row house called London House. And I don't even know what they called it because this was long before the term transgender came into general use. It might've been something about, you know, transvestites and transsexuals or something of that sort. But in any case, it was a small group of people but it was really worthwhile. We would occasionally go out afterwards for drinks at the Philbeach Gardens Hotel which was actually this very elegant hotel in Earl's Court. And I remember one summer evening we sat in the garden of the Philbeach Gardens Hotel, which was this beautiful little garden in the back of the hotel. And what my lover—Bernard [Palmer]—did not like it. He, you know, he wanted a boy who was a boy, not a boy who was a girl. So I could only persuade him to go out with me dressed once—we went to the opera. And he was so freaked out at the possibility that someone might recognize him. That I might be read, I didn't have any problems with the ladies room or anything. But he was freaked out over the possibility.

Awad: So what was that like for you? Was that the first relationship where you were fully who you are?

Park: Well, I mean the thing was that I wasn't. I was only who I was, in terms of my gender identity on the side. In terms of our relationship, we had a complicated relationship—a very complicated relationship. The two big relationships that I've had in my life were all very early. The first was David [Carter], who was the gay activist in Madison and that was from '79 to '81. And then there was Bernard in '82–'83 in London. And he was the only man I lived with. We had a lot in common. We were both big opera queens, I was—you know, to this day, my brother still refers to my two years in London as the thousand-and-one nights at the opera. [laughter] I did nothing else. But I did see a lot of theatre and opera when I was in London. Here, music. Because, you know, London rivals New York as the world capital of music and theatre and opera. And back then they had really cheap student tickets to English National Opera at the Colosseum for a pound, you know a dollar fifty. Same thing at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. And I saw amazing productions—I saw some not so great stuff too, but I saw Placido Domingo singing *La fanciulla del West*, you know, for example. Great Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare Company productions at the Barbican Theatre. So London wasn't as—you know, having grown up on the south side of Milwaukee, having only been to the theatre once to see a production of A Christmas Carol at the Pabst Theater when I was a senior year in high school, as part of a trip. My parents had really little formal education, and so they weren't really into the arts—they weren't into painting or theatre. The one art form which was very acceptable, which was actually encouraged in the Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, was music. Martin Luther considered music the spark of the divine, so that was the officially sanctioned art form, right? Because it was

connected with the church and hymn singing and the glorification of God, and all that kind of stuff. I didn't get into painting and the visual arts until I went to London. I took the only course I've ever had in art history, which was a course in modern art history with a professor from one of the other UW campuses. And it totally opened my eyes to painting, which I'd never really been exposed to. I mean my parents had one or two sort of paintings on the wall but they weren't, they weren't [Henri] Matisse or anything. They weren't clowns on black velvet, [laughter] but they weren't Jan van Eyck either. And so with regard to art, I kind of worked my way backwards from Picasso, the high moderns, back to the gothic and what have you. And then became very interested in Asian art as well. So London was an extraordinary experience. I came back from London in October '83. Moved in with my brother, lived with him in Chicago for five years. Four of those years I worked in public relations, which was my first career.

Awad: And were you—what was that like going from London to Chicago? And were you, you know, on the gender level, were you living in the way that's aligned with…?

Park: No, I kind of went back in the tranny closet. I had this—and this is not uncommon either, I kind of convinced myself, persuaded myself that that was a phase that I'd gone through. And so after my first few months back in Chicago, I put all my dresses and my gowns into a steamer trunk and pushed them into the closet. I was still openly gay, which in and of itself, was actually pretty gutsy for, you know, 1984. Basically 33 years ago. I worked for two public relations agencies. At university, I worked for one year for the American Bar Association (the ABA) in the president's office. And that was an education in another way [door opens]—feel free to come on in, April. Hi. I'm finishing an interview you're welcome to hear it. And I worked—I mean, I think I learned a huge amount. And I don't regret it at all because it was really an education in what corporate America is all about. I learned a lot of specific skills, some of which I use to this day, some of the media relations things, for example. But I decided that after four years of that, helping large corporations enhance their public images, was not life fulfilling for me. So I decided to go for my PhD. I went down to University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to do my PhD in Political Science. Spent five years—well, I was there from '88 to '94, but one of those years was in Europe.

Awad: Now during this time, you know, HIV is becoming part of the discourse and gay people are gaining some kind of visibility. I'm wondering, were you—you said you kind of went back in the closet, at least on the gender level. But I'm wondering, were in those years in Chicago, were you—were you, you know, part of any gay communities? Were you part of any sort of gay life, however you wanna think of that...

Park: Well, yeah, I mean the one group I was a member of was this group called Asians and Friends Chicago.

Awad: So that was the period then.

Park: Right, right. And although that was before the three gay Asians who I had met at the conference here in New York in June '94, remember. So I didn't meet them at that point. I met them in '94. So I was a member of this group which was, you know, not only apolitical but it kind

of anti-political in a way, you know. I was not an activist; I mean I was following politics and the AIDS crisis was in full swing. I was lucky in that I'd managed to stay negative but two of my boyfriends actually died of AIDS. Yeah. One of them—

Awad: During that period?

Park: Yeah. One of them, who was my first boyfriend in London, Stephen [Davis], died of AIDS when I was living in Chicago. I only found out through a mutual friend. And then I had a boyfriend, an American, in Paris, when I lived in Paris in the spring of '92, who died of AIDS a few years later. He moved back to Oklahoma with his mother, basically to die. And so that was, you know, that was very sad and shocking, but it wasn't surprising since so many gay men were dying of AIDS during the 80s.

Awad: And as someone who, you know, is in relationships with men and your brother was so—had come out to you. What was it like to be living in a—you know, tell me a little bit about what that was like living in Chicago at that time.

Park: Well, Chicago at that point—

Awad: And in that—in your particular context.

Park: Right. At that point, Chicago was not hit quite as hard as New York. That would come a little bit later. But it's certainly, you know, the AIDS crisis was certainly significant at that point. I had a number of friends who were HIV positive and were out, who were openly HIV positive, who were involved with AIDS activism, some of them. A lot of the community organizing in the LGBT community was around HIV/AIDS. It was—I mean it was something that you had to think about. I mean, dating, you had to think about it. Having sex, you had to think about what safe sex meant. You know, condom usage became pretty de rigueur [required by etiquette] at that point. It was—fortunately, I mean I was very saddened by the death of these two former boyfriends but fortunately it didn't touch me quite as directly—I didn't have close friends who died of AIDS at that time. It was a strange period in a way, I mean this is, you know, Morning in America—[Ronald] Reagan's, it was a very—it was a whole Reagan era and very corporate. And I was trying my best to fit into corporate America, as, you know—and it's funny to say because I had never thought of myself as a man but that is how I was gendered, right? It was kind of almost the last gasp of that, like, try harder. [laughter] But it never quite worked out. It always felt a little bit like an act, I always felt a little bit theatrical, having to put on a suit and tie, which I hated. And so that was a very strange period, but it was also, there was a lot of good stuff that happened to me during that period as well.

Awad: And at this time, you also, I don't know if this was the case—well, maybe I should ask you. When you were in college and in London, did you seek community with other Asian Americans having grown up in such an Anglo...?

Park: Well, the funny thing was, when I was at LSE, I actually joined the Koreans Student Association, but I didn't speak a word of Korean. And so I'd go to the meetings and they'd all be in Korean and they'd all be chatting away and I'd be sitting there, wondering what they were talking about. They were very nice to me. I mean, they embraced me, took me to their bosom like a long-lost cousin. And there weren't a lot of Korean students. There were tons of Chinese students, ethnic Chinese from—particularly from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. Just tons of Chinese from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. But the Korean student population was pretty small. But other than that, you know, I would...

Awad: Chicago you said...

Park: Oh, and Chicago right.

Awad: So I was just wondering, you know, what your kind of coming back, going back into the closet a little bit, there is this climate that is—you know, things are a little scary. And I'm wondering, that's the moment that you start to sort of connect with Asian API...

Park: Yes, in a limited way but I don't think, you know, I don't think I really came to consciousness until grad school and it wasn't towards the end. So I was in grad school from August '88 until I guess May of '94. I actually defended my dissertation in December '93, but I stayed on campus because of the academic schedule for spring semester '94. And I took a graduate proseminar in political theory which was not one of my subfields. My subfields were international relations and comparative politics but it was really quite an eye opener. We read a whole bunch of theorists but the one who grabbed me was Foucault. So I went through this huge Foucauldian period and really, Foucault did really help me disentangle all of these identity complexes that I had grown up with because it really helped me rethink these binary oppositions. For example of man/woman, Korean/American, right? So, what I came to realize, thinking through all of this, both through personal experience and reading Foucault, was that I had set up these binary oppositions that were false dichotomies. That I could think of myself as a woman, albeit one who was male-bodied and who didn't have some experiences that some women have. For example, menstruation, which is one that I don't particularly want to have or—

Awad: I thought you were going to say voting for Hillary [Clinton].

Park: [laughter] That's also an experience I've never had.

Awad: [laughter]

Park: Right. And never will have, and never hope to have. [laughter] But, you know, it's interesting to me because it helped me disentangle these binary oppositions. So to me, sex and gender are two very different things. And being male-bodied and identifying as a woman, to me are not the least bit contradictory. And I sometimes shock other trans people by—I'll occasionally refer to myself as a male-bodied woman, which really shocks them because for a lot of people it's very important for them to align their anatomy and biology with their gender identity. And that's great

if they want to do that, if that's their path. But for me, gender identity and physical embodiment are very different things. And similarly, with regard to racial ethnic national identity, I came to realize that there was this binary opposition of real Korean versus fake Korean that I had been thinking through, which denied the authenticity of my experience as a Korean adoptee. That I had a distinct identity, as a Korean adoptee, coming out of distinct experiences having been born in Korea, raised in the U.S. in a white household, but obviously having Asian physiognomy and therefore being read as Asian in some sense. And going back to Korea, back in June/July 2015 actually helped bring that whole process full circle. Being in Korea, it's funny because I have one friend, a gay white man, who asked me when I came back, "did you feel particularly Korean when you were in Korea?" and I said, “Actually, I've never felt less Korean.” But that didn't bother me really, it was sort of, it was more important for me to see the land of my birth. And feeling somewhat déraciner as the French would say, rooted, and never feeling entirely home anywhere and feeling that home is always, in some ways, in a certain sense, kind of an abstraction. And in some ways it has given me a certain feeling for other people's, Palestinian people in particular—although my experience obviously is totally different from Palestinians living under a brutal occupation in the West Bank. But the sense of feeling displaced and dispossessed—and of course Korea actually did suffer forty years of a foreign military occupation, which was only ended by the end of World War I. But this feeling of never quite being at home anywhere [door opens]—Hi, come on in...

Awad: Hi, this is part two of the oral history interview with Pauline Park. I'm at Queens Pride House again. It’s April 13, 2017 and this oral history is part of the New York Trans Oral History Project and we’re trying to collect the stories of trans and gender nonconforming people throughout New York. So in part one, we had, you know, covered quite a bit of ground regarding your biography and that sort of thing. And we sort of left off in, in your time in Chicago. And so just following the—our discussion, you know, before starting, if you could give some key dates in your life. Maybe some key events and that might be helpful to sort of pick up into what we were sort of talking about. Okay.

Park: I'll start with about a dozen or so dates that will help create a chronology for people to follow my long and winding journey through life. [laughter] So I was born in October of 1960. I left Korea and was adopted. I left Korea May of 1961. I was adopted in June and grew up in Milwaukee. I graduated high school in May 1978. Went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison in August 1978. I moved to London in August 1981. Lived there two years until October 1983, when I came back to the U.S. Moved in with my brother in Chicago. I lived there until August 1988, when I started my PhD program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I finished my dissertation in December 1994, but stayed on campus until the summer of 1995. Within that time period, I lived in Champaign-Urbana except for two months when I was in Berlin in September and October 1990. And then a year, in 1991 – '92, I spent six weeks in Regensburg in Bavaria in the summer of 1991. Moved to Brussels, lived there for five months in the fall of 1991. Then moved down to Paris in January of '92, and lived there through June. And then moved, came back to the U.S. Spent some time in Chicago, and moved back down to Champagne-Urbana in August '92 and as I say, then finished my dissertation—my dissertation defense was actually in December 1994. And in August '95, I moved up to Lake Forest in the suburbs of Chicago where I

had a year-long teaching position. And then moved to New York in '95, in August '95. I drove from Lake Forest to Staten Island, making several stops along the way. And including Syracuse and Aurora, upstate, where I had friends who were living there. And I taught at Wagner College in fall '95, spring semester '96, and fall semester—no. Fall '95, spring '96, and fall '96. I left Wagner, I moved from Staten Island to Queens in January 1997. I moved to the apartment that I still live in, here in Jackson Heights. Co-founded Queens Pride House in January '97, as well as Iban/Queer Koreans of New York—which I led from 1997 until May '99. I co-founded NYAGRA, the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy, in June 1998. We started the campaign for the New York City transgender rights law shortly thereafter; really starting in November of '98. My formal coming out as a public figure was in February 2000, when we had a press conference on the steps of City Hall announcing the campaign for the bill, which was introduced in June of 2000. And was ultimately enacted, passed by the city council April 24, 2002, signed into law by the mayor on April 30, 2002. A few other dates—I served as the first openly transgender Grand Marshal of the New York City LGBT Pride March in June 2005, which was a great honor. I went to Romania for three weeks in the summer of 2005. In the—in January 2012, I went on the first U.S. LGBT Delegation Tour of Palestine—historic event. The other big trip that I've taken since then was in June and July 2015—the first time since I left Korea in 1961 that I've been back and I spent four weeks, the last two weeks of June and the first two weeks of July. During the course of which I spoke at the Queer Korea Festival Seoul Pride Parade at the end of June 2015, which was the largest event in the history of the LGBT community of Korea. I was what you might call the guest keynote speaker. And I gave three other presentations in July. I became executive director of Queens Pride House. Oh, I was elected president of the Board of Directors of Queens Pride House in July 2010. I returned to the board of Queens Pride House in April 2010. Was elected president in July 2010. And became executive director in May 2012. Stepped down as executive director in July 2015. And I'm planning my first trip to Norway, which will be in June of this year. So those are a bunch of dates to throw. I'm sure some others will come up but those will help orient people to the timeframe—of my life to date.

Awad: [laughter] Thank you for that extensive chronology. I'm trying to keep in mind certain points, that certain questions that I have from that. I think that it might make more sense, at least for me, as an interviewer to just dial it back a little bit and ask some broad strokes kind of questions. I think that might make sense given how detailed a personal chronology you just gave. So it might overlap a teeny bit with part one, but I think that's okay.

Park: And we can double back, and fill in details with Chicago.

Awad: Yeah.

Park: The one thing I'll just say is that, I tend to think of my life in terms of distinct periods or chapters. And they are—many of them are very geographically defined. So, I talk about my Milwaukee period, my Madison period, my London period, and my Chicago period. Sort of like, you know, [Pablo] Picasso's blue period.

Awad: [laughter] I was just going to say, I was just going to say the blue period, the pink period.

Park: That's right.

Awad: But I wasn't sure if that would be gauche or something. I don't know. [laughter] Um, I wanted to just ask again. Now, you had returned from London— you know after your—

Park: Two years.

Awad: After two years.

Park: And just to clarify, as I had mentioned, the first year, the first academic year I was a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And we had faculty from several different UW campuses, as part of the student abroad—study abroad program. And it was the first year of the study abroad program in London. So that was August, August 1981 through May 1982. I applied to the London School of Economics and Political Science and was accepted. And so that was academic year 1982 to 1983.

Awad: Okay, thank you. My question, you know, so you came back to Chicago. You're living with your brother. And in our previous interview, you said that you sort of, went back into the closet regarding your gender identity. And, but at the same time in the U.S. thinking of your life in terms of periods—you have the first HIV and AIDS cases, and cases of activism. And we kind of touched on that a little bit, but I was just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what it was like to live at that time for you as a trans woman. And you know, sort of starting to come to terms with—with how you wanted to live in the world at that time.

Park: I think the 1980s were a very interesting period. This was all Reagan's Morning in America, and so in some ways was a rather conservative, even right-wing reactionary period in some respects. So I spent a few years in the bowels of corporate America and it was an interesting experiment in some ways with making one last attempt to sort of play this role, this gender normative role. I was still openly gay which actually was, at that time, you know, a pretty out there thing to be but I was in the process of trying to suppress my gender identity. The AIDS crisis was in full bloom and that was certainly, I think, topic number one in the LGBT community. In the gay male community. People didn't use the term LGBT at that time. Chicago was maybe less hard hit initially than New York or San Francisco. And I had lived in London, where certainly people were starting to be infected with HIV, but when I was living there from '81 to '83, it was not an epidemic at the time. So I came back to the U.S., moved to Chicago. Found that HIV/AIDS was very much turning into a crisis and an epidemic. I found myself in a curious position in some ways because even though there was this crisis in the gay male community, I was actually in a fairly stable situation personally. I had my first professional position. So I was actually making money for the first time, in a real way. I—my salaries at these various jobs were not enormous by any means. But since my brother and I both had professional positions, and we were sharing a one-bedroom apartment in Chicago, we were what some people categorized as DINKS, dual income no kids. And so, we could afford to go to the supermarket and just pick stuff off the shelves without thinking twice about it. We were by no means living in the lap of luxury. We spent four

years living in what they call a four-plus-one—and four-plus-ones are somewhat notorious for being rather ugly and shoddily constructed but our building, though not well-built, was cleaned and well-maintained. And we lived in Lakeview East. Some people started to call it Boystown. At the time I was living in it, people called it New Town. That was sort of the lingo at the time. Now people call it Boystown or something else. Real estate agents like to call it Belmont Harbor, which sounds very exclusive. There is actually a little harbor with boats—we didn't have a boat. We would sometimes go jogging, running past the harbor along the lakefront, which was very nice. So I had four different jobs. My first one was working for Daniel J. Edelman which is a major public relations firm. I worked there from, I think January/February 1984 until the summer of '85 when I jumped ship and went to Burson-Marsteller which is actually the largest public relations agency in the world. And I was there for a year and a half. Then, I went on to the American Bar Association, was there for a year. And then went onto Loyola University Public Relations Department and I was there for a year. It was all a very interesting experience. I'll just preface it by mentioning the fact that I had the worst job of my entire life for about two months in, I think it was December, November/December, early January in the law library of Northwestern University, the Project Office. Where I spent several hours a day using little hot irons, ironing labels off of and onto book spines because the library transitioned from duodecimal to Library of Congress. And the only thing that saved my sanity was that there were several other people doing the same thing and we got to chat all day while we were doing this really dismal grub beetle of a job. Public relations was something that I fell into. I was talking to a friend of my brother's, who had gone to the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern and done an MSJ in Journalism with him. And I had thought about journalism as a career. Oddly enough, in high school, the only two careers that I could imagine were journalism and music. I had a rather limited imagination when it came to careers. And of course, transgender activist was not in any of those books in my high school library about careers along with firefighter or truck driver or nurse. LGBT activist was not in one of those books. In any case, because the job market in journalism was really extremely competitive, and I didn't want to do what some journalism students do which is go out into the foothills of eastern Tennessee and work for some teeny tiny little— as a reporter for some teeny tiny little newspaper and work your way up. I didn't want to do that, I wanted to stay in Chicago. I took the advice of this friend of my brother's, looked around and decided to go into public relations. It was not particularly fulfilling doing corporate public relations to enhance the public images of large corporations. But I will say, I learned a lot. And it was actually a really good way to start because I really learned how corporate America works. I know a lot of people who are very idealistic and they immediately want to go into, you know, public interest law or nonprofit work or work for an LGBT advocacy organization. And that's all very well and good, but I actually think that my advice to the extent that people would like to hear it is, if you want to do social justice work, it's actually good to spend a year or two working in the corporate sector. First of all, to help pay back your student loans. [laughter] But secondly and more importantly, to learn how the quote-quote real world works. Because you can actually take on the powers that be more effectively if you understand how they work and how they think. And so I think to the extent that I have been an effective activist, part of that is informed by the professional work that I did in public relations in Chicago.

Awad: Now, I think I want to ask another meta-theme question. Thinking about that background and what you just said and thinking about when you came to New York you pretty readily became active on a lot of advocacy issues, what is—what was your perspective or philosophy or approach in founding some of these organizations when you came to New York? Given your history background, given this background in public relations—what is sort of like your theory of change that you were kind of working with?

Park: [laughter] Well, suggesting that I had a theory of change is probably giving me more credit than I deserve. I think that the only— the only career that I really consciously chose was my academic career. I feel like an accidental activist. I feel like I fell into it. And was invited, for example, to join the group of people who ended up forming the board of Queens Pride House. I was invited to join this little group that ended up becoming Iban/Queer Koreans of New York. I was invited by a friend to work with this friend to co-found NYAGRA. I think that my—to the extent that I have a theory of change, it's developed and evolved with the years. I think in terms that meta-question, [laughter] social change is a long-term project and you can score short-term victories but you really have to focus on long-term fundamental transformational change. Which isn't to say that there's an either/or choice between incremental change and fundamental transformational change. In fact, I think, far from being a binary opposition, to do one, you have to end up doing the other anyway. But it's a perspective that's informed by my reading of history—I've probably read more history than anything else. And looking at the history of many different movements. Looking at the history of the women's movement, the African American civil rights movement, the Asian American movement, movements for Indigenous rights, the anti-apartheid Palestine solidarity activism that I've been doing. Each of them has its own distinct history in context, but there are commonalities that all of them share. And one thing that I think one has to do, and this is a fairly crucial point, is understand identity politics but not be limited by it. So in my view, there is an important role for identity politics and identity politics formations which is to name specific types of oppression and challenge them and bring together people who have the common experience of that oppression but not be limited to single issue politics or limited to understanding even those particular issues in an overly narrow conceptualization. So, for example, I'm probably better known for transgender activism than anything else, and in less than an hour, the transgender support group will be meeting here at Queens Pride House which I facilitate and coordinate. So there is a reason for specific formation or venue or site, such as this, because the people who come here share a common oppression based on gender identity or expression. That being said, I don't limit myself to a narrow conception of that. I'll give you an example. I read, just yesterday, about the first trans man who is openly transgender who is serving in the Israeli military. Well, [laughter] that's obviously being used by the Israeli government in their pinkwashing campaign, to pinkwash the legal occupation of Palestine, right? So, great that the Israeli military allows openly LGBT people to serve. Great that there is an Israeli trans man who feels comfortable enough to come out in the military and serve in the military. But he is going to commit human rights atrocities, just like every other member of the Israeli military. And is going to contribute to the oppression of Palestinians living under the illegal occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. And many of those people will be LGBT, whether they're out or not in Palestinian society. So I think we need—not only an intersectional lens, and that's the popular term [door opens]— hi, come on in! So, I think the meta, the big

picture here, is that there are reasons for specific formations whether those be transgender specific, queer API specific, in the case of Iban/QKNY queer Korean specific, women's spaces, etcetera. There are compelling reasons for spaces like that which are entirely different from exclusionary spaces, such as for whites only or men only. And that's a false symmetry because one type of space is meant to empower marginalized groups and the other is meant to exclude them. That being said, one has to think through carefully why a space should be limited to a specific group of people at a specific group of time. And to also think through—[car horns] [laughter] Sorry about the—

Awad: That's okay.

Park: Political formations. And in the case of not only LGBT politics but social justice more broadly, I think a distinction has to be made between having people who are in the effective group as it were in leadership positions versus excluding allies from participation, which in general doesn't work. There might be—there might be very specific situations where that might be called for but in general, I don't think it's a good idea. So I've worked in different types of formations, very often in coalition. Some of these initiatives have been successful, some less so.

Awad: What would you consider your biggest accomplishment in your activism?

Park: Well, I still think my leading the campaign for the New York City transgender rights law is my biggest accomplishment.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about that? And why that was an important achievement?

Park: Well, it's a very long story so I'll try to give you the short version. The campaign lasted for less than two years, and, well, it basically started in February 2000 and we got the bill signed to law in April 2002 so it was slightly over two years—the bill was introduced in June of 2002. It was vitally important because transgender people face pervasive discrimination, abuse, harassment, and violence in this city and throughout the country and in most countries throughout the world. And New York City administrative code did not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity or expression. And case law was very limited and limiting. It was essentially limited to post-op transsexuals and people who are perhaps in the process of transitioning, under the rubric of what I call the classic transsexual transition narrative. But there were so many people who were not covered. So it was really vitally important that they be protected from discrimination—

Awad: Now just for clarity for this, when you say discrimination, are you talking about all kinds of discrimination? Employment, or—

Park: So the New York City administrative code prohibits discrimination based on employment, housing, and public accommodations, which are sometimes called the big three. And then other things such as credit and education. So employment is fairly obvious, housing. Public accommodations is a thing that people don't necessarily understand but it's any space that's not someone's home, someone's apartment, or house. So it could be a store, a department store, a

supermarket, a restaurant. Restrooms, public restrooms, are now the hot topic with this whole bathroom panic. And so it's really vital that people be protected from discrimination in all these situations. Now ultimately, these are only forms of legal redress, and women and people of color can certainly attest to the fact that enactment to the 1964 Federal Civil Rights Act did not end discrimination based on sex or gender or race or ethnicity. But it gave legal redress to those who suffered discrimination and it sent a signal that the federal government would act against those who commit discrimination against women and people of color. Juridical rights are very important but they're only part of a bigger picture. Oh—

Awad: Okay, so let me just—just going to rephrase. We just had to move locations because, due to logistical things here at Queens Pride House. So my final question for you, you know, as someone who facilitates support groups, you have your various experience doing activism, etcetera, and we had talked a little bit about your skepticism regarding representational politics, etcetera. I'm wondering—what do you hope for, for trans communities these days?

Park: I hope for the full empowerment of the transgender community—by which I mean everyone in the community can feel that they can actualize their identities whatever those may be. That they can express themselves in terms of gender freely without fear of discrimination, harassment, abuse, or violence. And that is a long-term project. As I said before, the 1964 Civil Rights Act certainly didn't end racism or sexism in the U.S.; no law can do that. However, through changes in law and public policy, through the type of transgender sensitivity trainings that I do, through public education broadly conceived, we can actually change hearts and lives and change society. I would remark upon the really remarkable progress that we've made in the 22-23 years since I've started to do activism in 1994. 23 years later, the LGBT community is in a much better place. We still have very far to go but if you think about the trajectory of the marriage movement—while marriage was never at the top of my list as terms of priorities for the LGBT community, I did support it because even though I share the feminist and the queer critique of marriage as a heteronormative institution, I don't think the state should be able to discriminate on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity in the issuance of the marriage licenses. But in any case, if you look at the trajectory of the marriage movement, public opinion in the U.S. shifted on marriage more quickly and radically than on any other social values issue in my lifetime. When the marriage movement started some thirty some years ago, it was three couples in Hawaii who wanted to get marriage licenses. I think two were lesbians and one was a gay male couple. Now, a majority of Americans in virtually every poll taken support marriage equality. And among people under thirty-five, it's well over two-thirds if not three-quarters majority. And so while the marriage movement is not necessarily a model for any other movement, the ability to shift public opinion on an issue that the marriage movement was able to achieve is potentially a model. And so in terms of transgender, if you think about the extraordinary visibility that transgender people now have—I am no fan of Caitlyn Jenner's, however her coming out was a major public event. It was the first time that a transgender woman coming out had such an impact and it was front page news everywhere. While she has, I think since kind of ruined her reputation in many ways, nonetheless at the very least it greatly enhanced the visibility of the transgender community. And so what we need to do is enhance the visibility of these marginalized communities and press for real change. And ultimately for

transformational change. We need to change the way society thinks about gender. And we need to think very broadly about societal change and not limit ourselves either to purely juridical questions of legal rights or to narrow identity categories, but really create a society which is freer and fairer for everyone and do so in terms of a global society as well. I think that activism is just a label for making change and I see myself as an agent of social change. And as a change agent, I feel called to do the work that I do. I certainly felt that in terms of founding the various organizations that I co-founded, and in the last six years I felt a real calling to do Palestine solidarity activism, in part because it's so hard and few people want to do it, and because New York is the epicenter of the Zionist machine. And so it is, as I like to say, the best and the worst place to do this kind of work. But it's also an example of where I refuse to limit myself to rigid identity formations, identity-based formations. Because ultimately, an injury to one is an injury to all, as Martin Luther King would say. And so to use a few other famous quotes, as the Mahatma Gandhi would say, we have to be the change that we want to see in the world. So being an activist, oddly enough, ends up being a little bit like the priesthood [laughter]. It's a priestly calling. It's a calling to do rather thankless work that most other people don't want to do. But the social change that we create is its own reward.

Awad: Thank you so much Pauline.

Park: Thank you so much for the interview Nadia.