

**Interviewee: Carol Millett**

**Interviewer: Joseph Lahey**

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The following interview was conducted as part of the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors' Archive's Lesbian Oral Histories Project.

*JL: To start off, and these questions are just sort of to guide you along the conversation. If there's anything you want to say that's not included in the questions – if you want to take it anywhere else, please feel free to do that. So, just starting off, would you be able to tell me a little bit about yourself? So, that can be anything you're willing to share about date, place of birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, places of residence, employment history and how long you've been living in Nova Scotia.*

CM: Born in Nova Scotia, in Halifax in 1951. I'm adopted so I don't know my birth parents' information, so I don't have a lot of ident– medical information I should say. And I grew up outside of Halifax with my adoptive family. I went to school in Halifax, junior high school, well grade school and high school, and university at the Mount, and then I became politically active in my early 20s and was involved in a Marxist/Leninist organization back in the day. And it was there that I became, well as I said, politicized, and at that time I was out. I came out in university, first year. Seemed like everybody was – once you come out, seems like everybody is, and before you come out, nobody is. It's a really strange phenomenon.

But anyway, I got involved in a women's movement, in Halifax and it was a very active time, very, very active time. Very robust, lots of organizing, and you know, take back the night, International Women's Day was a big event and the political organization that I was involved with, we sponsored and co-organized many events as well. For International Women's Day, as well of course union work. Um, in terms of gay rights, that wasn't, that wasn't a big issue back then in the 70s in my political involvement, and I'm not sure why that was but being more focused on the working class, shall we say, it didn't seem to be as prevalent. And I wasn't a member of the Gay Alliance Towards Equality which was also very, ah, principle organization in the gay movement at that time. And if you've read the book, [*laughter*] now that I mention it, the name escapes me. Oh, *Before the Parade*, yes, *Before the Parade*. There's, a, my participation in that was limited only because I was being so politically active in other areas. Anyway, that's a bit about my background. Oh, I worked at a Canadian Linen Supply which was a, that was my political workplace, that's why I was working there. The union organizing work.

*JL: Right. Right. Okay, I was just going to say, so I know you touched on this a little bit so, the next question asks about your experiences interacting with the LGBTQ+ community in Nova Scotia. So that could be organized activism in community groups, but that could also just be personal relationships in the community.*

CM: Well, had lots of personal relationships in the community at that time. Of course, then there was social, the dances were a big thing. Now, of course they aren't now, and not just because, I don't mean in the last two years, but in the last, oh, I don't know maybe 10 years. I stopped hearing about dances. And dances were a key form, at least in the cities, in Halifax. I don't know if there were any others around the province, but dances were a very important social venue, obviously. But even before the dances started, there were clubs, and you're probably, you know it, having read, I'm sure you've read *Before the Parade*, you know, the clubs were a critical part, and there were a lot that weren't even mentioned there in *Before the Parade* because were, they may not have lasted for very long. I can remember a lot of them that just lasted, well for a variety of reasons they didn't last long. But they had their role to play in people having a place to get together other than one's home. Now, I lived in the cities, so I don't know what people did in rural areas. I suspect they just met in each other's homes, because you certainly couldn't go to the legion and be out and about. So, I frequented some of those places as well, the clubs, and the dances. And what was lovely about those dances they reached a certain point where the men and the women would have dances together, and there was just such a comradery. Now this didn't happen all the time, but it reached a certain point where there was a level of acceptance and as I say, a level of camaraderie between the men and the women that was really lovely.

And then, of course, it stopped, because for some reason the dances stopped. And the women started having their own dances, and had been all along actually, so that venue became really important. And you know, much less so was going to the Turret at the time for example. No sorry, this was post Turret. Turret was a wonderful experience in and of itself as you can tell from *Before the Parade*, but after the Turret when Rumors began, and even after the demise of Rumors, women started organizing dances on their own, and that filled a really important social void. But again, that's all in the city, so, and we knew that there were lesbians in rural areas, obviously, but there wasn't any way to really contact them unless you knew somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody.

*JL: Right. Yeah, so you'd say that those clubs and dances were – they were a safe space essentially, right?*

CM: Oh yes, absolutely. Now I should say they're a safe space for white lesbians and gays. Trans people at that time I think there was a great acceptance as well. Not as, not the same awareness as there is today, but I think there was a great acceptance, but I can't, I mean, I can't really speak to that directly. But I can speak to though – I know that there were, for example, there were African-Nova Scotian lesbians and one maybe, maybe one gay man, [redacted] and, other than that, and I mean a few lesbians from the African-Nova Scotian community, but there wasn't a lot of socializing and I suspect, I know that there was more than one or two, you know, black lesbians – so they didn't feel comfortable and I think that's important too, to acknowledge, you know, that there was, and that was true as well within the women's movement at the time, you know, during the 70s and the 80s, It was very white.

*JL: Right. And in those, ah, the dances and the clubs would you say there was, was there a noticeable difference between the amount of gay men and lesbian women who were attending these?*

CM: Ah, the clubs, oh it was mostly men. Probably, I don't know a percentage. But part of that would be because gay, single men have a fairly large disposable income compared to, you know, single women who are lesbians in our society, and that may have changed a little bit since then, but I don't think essentially it has, you know, and a lot of the women would have had, would be single mothers, so there wasn't a lot of disposable income to go to the bars [*JL: Right*] and if, you know, I remember talking about this and you would have, you'd have a certain amount of money that you could you know, spend on buying a few drinks, but the men seemed to have unlimited money to buy all sorts of drinks. And you know what I mean, it was quite a different experience really, from that point of view.

*JL: Right*

CM: But there were definitely more men than women. And part of that is that women, many women didn't want to be in a mixed group. They wanted to have their own dances and social gatherings and that sort of thing because they felt safe or comfortable. And there were some men, ah some women who didn't appreciate men in drag because they thought it was misogynous, and then, you know so there was that aspect as well that would keep them away. But then when, ah, the what's the one on, ha, the name escapes me right at this moment. It was on Salter Street – Reflections, on Salter St. Now there was a period of that bar where they had, they had drag shows, and the women would participate just as much as the men, so that was a real evolution in the city I think, because that wouldn't have happened before. [*JL: Right*] The women would

have gone into these drag shows. Anyway, there was ah, I think there's great acceptance of it now even, but...

*JL: And you mentioned that some of these dances and clubs, they closed for various reasons. Do you have any notable memories of certain closures and why they closed?*

CM: Hm, well, no not specifically. I mean, because I wasn't directly involved in the organizing of them, I wouldn't know, and sometimes it might be in-fighting, sometimes it's just an evolutionary thing you know, it's played its course. I remember there was one club that was started by a woman that I knew, a lesbian that I knew and, um, she – I think that one ended, she wanted to make a place that was a bit more upscale than what we had known, and that didn't fly. Either she didn't have enough backing, or there wasn't support for it. I'm not really sure about that, but I know she suffered a great deal in the long run, financially, in the long run for that venture. But no, I don't um, GAE [Gay Alliance for Equality], the Turret was run as you know, probably by GAE. Rebecca Rose did a really job of, you know, documenting a lot of that period.

*JL: Yes, yes, she did. So, the next question I have here is about materials for the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors archive. So, have you ever donated materials to the archive, and if so how and why did you collect these materials?*

CM: No.

*JL: No, you haven't?*

CM: No.

*JL: Okay.*

CM: I haven't any materials left to...

*JL: Right, right.*

CM: Now Robin Metcalf – Robin Metcalf is the archivist. He would have tons of stuff, but, you know, I shouldn't, I should – I jumped to Robin very quickly. [Redacted] also did an archival documentation if you will. Are you familiar with this? It's at the public archives, on les— on women, on lesbians in the lesbian community here in Nova Scotia, so that material is at the public archives – the Nova Scotia archives.

*JL: Right*

CM: Because she organized, she and a couple other women organized a gathering of women at Veith House, oh not Veith House, sorry – oh I forgot to mention, I used to organize dances with [redacted]. Everybody got into the thing of organizing dances, women's dances. Because they were so popular. I forgot about that. We organized them at Veith House, and you know, back at that time Veith House is a very small venue but, we had great dances there. It was a lot of fun. Anyway, sorry [laughter] I just forgot about that. So, [redacted] organized a group of women, or invited women from all over the province to come, and for one or two days to record our memories so that we didn't lose them. So that's been all transcribed and given to the public archives.

*JL: Right, right. Very cool. Okay, so moving forward, I know you mentioned that you came out in university, so do you have a coming out story? And would you be able to speak about it a little bit?*

CM: Coming out story. Well, not really, not like some people do. I actually sort of knew that I was a lesbian even before I got to university. And I was dating fellows when I was about 18, and this one, but I never wanted to be intimately involved with them and this one fellow, you know, he just said, you're really weird. And I thought, well, no I just don't want to be intimate with you. So, and then it just became very clear to me that, where my interests did lie, and by the time I got to university, I hadn't really been involved with anyone, but I did have my first, you know, relationships at university, and then it was very clear, but, like I said earlier, it's before you realize that there are other people who are feeling and thinking the same way you do, you really do think you are the only one, because I had no other context for it, I had no— nobody in my family that I knew was a lesbian or gay person. It never, it just didn't have any context for it at all. But in university it was quite different. You know, there was a lot of exposure to, a lot of different ideas and, but, I don't have, don't have a great coming out story per say.

*JL: Right, right. So, you mentioned that, you know, once you came out seems like there were a lot of people who were also out, so, would you say that's more of like something that you personally realized, that there are many more people that are out, or was it at that time, a lot of people were actually coming out?*

CM: Well, it's hard to say because I was a bit more public than some of the other people. But once I realized that I was a lesbian and wanted to be around other women, then I went to places, like I remember, other people have said this as well. They would drive up and down Barrington St. because at that time, which was the early 70s, the only place that we knew of in town, in Halifax, was a bar called Dave's in the Green Lantern building. Irony of ironies, when I was much, much older, I went and worked at the Green Lantern building, probably in the same space that Dave had had his bar

many years earlier than that. But then, so we would, it was fairly common to hear stories of people driving up and down Barrington St., sort of getting up the courage to go into David's, to the bar. You knew it was there. And I remember walking in, finally, and it was kind of a dark and dingy sort of place, you know, which was a theme, I think. A lot of these bars were dark and dingy back in the day. I don't know, I guess that's sort of a reflection of, not fear necessarily, but of uncomfortableness, and maybe unacceptance. But anyway, there was one woman that I met the first time that I was at that bar, David's, or Dave's it was called, and ah, it was Anne Fulton. Anne Fulton has since passed away, which the sadness of that is that I didn't even know that she had passed away, so that's how far we have become isolated within our, within the lesbian community. A part of that is just age and, you know, you don't go to, well there aren't any dances to go to now, but you know for a while you just stopped socializing in the same ways that you did when you were younger. So, you lose touch with people, and that was a great sadness that I didn't know that she was even ill, let alone died. Because Anne Fulton, again, from Rebecca Rose's book played a very, very important role in lesbian community, so, that was a sadness.

*JL: Yeah. Okay.*

CM: And I might add, if I could Joseph, just tell you that adds, that speaks volumes, I think, about where, where the lesbian community, and I don't know if it's the same for gay men, but for the lesbian community, because women, and I'm thinking particularly of rural women who don't necessarily have the same social networks that... I know many of my friends, lesbian friends in the city, they're not suffering for social contact, and they're not isolated by and large. But in the rural areas that I think could be a real problem, because as women age, it's harder and harder to make friends and you don't move around as much, so you're in the same place, and I don't, I worry, well I don't worry per say, but I think that's a real concern. Particularly for lesbians, older lesbians in the rural areas, and then there's the whole issue, well what happens when, should you have to go to a nursing home, as you probably will hear from other women, but that is a concern, because do, will you have to go back into the closet then. That's a big concern.

*JL: Right.*

CM: And I would think it would even be maybe even more so for gay men, I don't know. And trans people, my goodness, I don't know what's going to happen. So that's a real concern. There really should be a, you know, a gay centred or, positive, it doesn't even have to be gay centred, but just a positive place where everybody is accepted.

*JL: Yeah. Yeah. So, you think, you know, navigating being out gets harder as you age then?*

CM: Not necessarily, because I've just joined the, in the Chester municipality, they've just are kind of coming on board to having an advisory committee on equity, diversion and inclusion. And I'm going to be sort of the older, I signed up, or applied as an older lesbian because our voices aren't heard there. And there's other things that I can speak to, other equity issues I can speak to, but I don't think that one is going to be represented, let's say, so that's why I wanted to join that committee now.

*JL: Right. So, another question I have here asks what kind of experiences have you had that you think are a direct result of either your gender or your sexual orientation? Yeah, and what were these potential experiences like for you?*

CM: Threats?

*JL: Oh, what were these experiences like for you?*

CM: Oh, experiences. I thought you said threats. I don't think I've ever had a threat, actually. I'm not sure exactly what you mean?

*JL: Yeah, it is pretty open ended, so just, you know, anything out, you say experience again, once again, pretty open ended and broad, but anything that has happened to you that you experienced throughout your life that you think is a direct cause from either your gender or your sexual orientation, or the combination of the two. Experience that is unique to you because of your identity, perhaps.*

CM: Well, what just popped into mind is not a very significant event, but it is, it did happen, is that when I was working at the Canadian Linen shop that I told you about, there was one other woman there that was a lesbian, and identified as such, we were the two there, openly two, and there was a staff Christmas party one year, and, so there was dancing at the Christmas party. So, we were dancing together, like it was a fast dance, it wasn't like a slow dance, because we weren't romantically interested in each other. But we were just dancing up on the floor, and this was before the time where, I think, it was so acceptable for even straight women to dance together on the floor, or, you know, on the dance floor. Anyway, so we were dancing and ah, these two, this man started to, would come to us to separate us, to, one would dance with her and one would dance with me, so it was like, it was strange because they, the only thing that, there would have been no other interaction with these, I don't even know who they were; there would have been no other interaction with these men, but they, the only

thing that I can think of is that they felt so threatened by our dancing together that they felt that they had to come over and separate us. And I'm sure that is not the first time that that happened. But it wasn't threatening to us in any way. They were, you know, trying to moderate the situation and keep it very normal, I think, in their eyes.

*JL: Yeah, it was, do you think it comes from a discomfort that they had?*

CM: Oh absolutely. Yes, yes. They felt threatened by this. You know, I know women who have been threatened because of being a lesbian. I haven't personally experienced that, which is really good. I've been very fortunate in that I've always worked in places where that's just never been an issue, and I've worked in places where the men have been, by and large, pretty progressive. Might not always agree with their ideas, but my sexuality was never an issue, which was really good, and I wouldn't have worked in any place that I wasn't accepted.

*JL: Right.*

CM: Anyway, some people don't have that option or don't have that choice, and I never felt that I had to be closeted in any of my workplaces, unlike many other people. I never worked for the government, so that might have been a different situation, I don't know.

*JL: Right.*

CM: So, I can't really think, and even as a— even where I live now in New Ross, which I consider to be the heart of, you know, *[laughter]* you know, white patriarchy *[laughter]* supremo in Nova Scotia, one of the places. Oh, I would like that, well I don't know if I'd want that admitted or not, but it is true, you know, it is very white and it's very patriarchal, very patriarchal and, but those, there are many, many people here who accept us – my partner and I – and it's not an issue, and they make that known in so many ways. And then those people that have a problem with it, we don't socialize with them anyway.

*JL: Right. So then, I guess from your prospective, and of course this is just one perspective, but, in your experience, you know, Halifax and Nova Scotia has been an accepting place of your identity and queer sexuality then.*

CM: For me it has been, for sure, you know. Yeah, I've, I think, well, I can't point to any experience where I felt endangered, and I can't say that's true for everybody, because I do know people, not lately but, you know, when we were younger. Women who would



have been attacked either verbally or physically if they were perceived as being a dyke, for example.

*JL: Right. So, you know just comparing like today to you know the days before, do you think there has been a big shift in just overall attitudes within the community about queerness?*

CM: Oh my gosh, yes. Oh, absolutely, yes, yes, yes, yes. In so many ways, you know. So many ways. And I think – it's interesting because we have to wonder why the social movement for acceptance of gays and lesbians has been, and trans, has been so quick, relatively speaking, in terms of changing social beliefs and norms and acceptances. I mean we never would have thought that there would be legislation that, you know, gays and lesbians could get married – never. I mean, well, not never, but you just don't think of it, back in, you know, 20, 30 years ago, you just never saw it as being something that would be possible. But it's interesting why that social norm has changed, and social acceptance has changed, and it hasn't so with colour. Like, there's no comparable shift in, profound shift in social acceptance of Indigenous peoples or African Nova– people of African descent, and that to me is the most intriguing bit. So, if you're a black woman, and a lesbian, or an Indigenous woman, you really are at the bottom of the heap, you know, which is something that I, in particular, feel really needs to – we need to move that social needle for sure. And why that soc– why that movement hasn't occurred as quickly as it has on gays and lesbians and trans people, I don't know. Don't know. I mean, I suspect, I mean we know it's racism, but why is it so, why is that one so difficult to change. [*JL: Right, right*] I mean, I have theories, but, but that's off the topic, but if, are any Black or Indigenous lesbians being interviewed, do you know?

*JL: I do not know. I do not have the full list, actually. No.*

CM: Because you're really not getting a, you're really falling, not you personally I mean, but the project itself would be falling into that same, you know, white privilege trap, [*JL: Right*] only getting a white point of view, which is skewed. So, and, erases the reality, the lived experience of Indigenous and African Nova Scotians and Brown lesbians, and older lesbians which, you know, well, they don't have their own community of support, don't know what will happen to them.

*JL: Right, right. So just talking about this, you know, this shift again and you know, attitudes becoming more accepting, so this shift in the movement, did you ever feel that it was being led by, or was favouring gay men over lesbian women, or was it more so of a collective?*

CM: Was the movement favouring gay men over lesbians?

*JL: Yeah, favouring or was public opinion more accepting of gay men than lesbian women? Or were gay men more prominently displayed in the movement?*

CM: Well, yes in the sense that men are always, I mean its patriarchy, so yes. I'm wondering that transcription has ended.

*JL: Oh, we, our transcriptionist will type it up themselves. We don't, we're not going to use the transcription on the teams' application.*

CM: Oh, I see. So, yes, clearly. I think that's a fair statement.

*JL: I guess that's, that's all the prewritten questions I have, so if there's anything else that has not been covered that you want to talk about, or put on the record?*

CM: Will the results of this research be available to the general public?

*JL: I believe so, I believe that is the goal. It will be, once you've approved the transcript, and the project is completed, it will be put into the Nova Scotia LGBTQ Seniors Archive, which is in the archives at Dalhousie. I think that is a publicly accessible archive, but if you did want to double check that would be a question for Anne, the Project Manager.*

CM: I can't think of anything more, Joseph. If you have, unless you have other questions.

*JL: I think I've asked everything. So, if that's the case then, if you're done, you've said everything you wanted to say then, I can stop the recording if you think you're all set.*

CM: Yeah, I can't, I mean, I can't think of anything else.

*JL: Okay, well in that case I will go ahead and stop the recording.*