

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE LEVINE
FOR THE
RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview of George Levine. The interview is taking place on December 7, 2016 in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham. One thing you talked about last time, that I was curious if you could say a little bit more about, is you said there were some professors who were there the first year or two at Livingston College and knew it was not for them and left.

George Levine: Yes, yes.

MG: I was curious what they were seeing or what they were experiencing that made them not want to stay.

GL: Well, there are two that come immediately to mind. One has been a very, very close friend of mine for a long time. [Bob Krauss] teaches psychology. He ran the psychology program the first year. He's a very distinguished guy. He had had offers from Harvard and whatever, and he got an offer from Columbia. As he considered the experience of the first year, he just felt that educationally it wasn't going to happen, and so he took the job. I'm sorry to say it was the right thing for him to do. He had a very distinguished career. He's retired now; he's exactly my age. We've been very close. We sometimes reminisce about particular students or about ways in which Livingston went wrong, but his life went entirely off the other way. He had less of a save-the-world attitude than I did, although he's a wonderfully committed guy himself. Although I saw all the things that he was skeptical about, I thought the experiment was worth doing, so I stayed. [Editor's Note: Robert Krauss served as the chairman of the Department of Psychology at Livingston College from 1968 to 1970.]

MG: You said there was one other.

GL: Oh, yes. I didn't know him well, but [Roy D'Andrade] was a very, very good anthropologist. I remember having long talks with him, and he felt that we were wrong, that politicizing the classroom was a bad thing to do. I liked him a lot, too. I didn't know him nearly as well as the psychologist. I felt that he was being too severe on the politics in the classroom, because there's almost no way not to raise political issues when you're dealing with certain cultural matters. He just didn't want that, so he went to Stanford. The thing to note is that [Dean Ernest] Lynton, that first go-around, Lynton hired people who clearly had all sorts of career options, because they were fairly distinguished.

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GL: These were really strong faculty. They would have been strong at Harvard or Columbia or Stanford or whatever, and some of them just felt that for their own careers and for really serious education, this wasn't the place.

MG: That came up in the other article you sent me written by Horowitz. [Editor's Note: Sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz served as the chair of the sociology department at Livingston College from 1969 to 1973.]

GL: Oh, yeah.

MG: They were Ivy League educators, but not Ivy League-caliber students. That created a little bit of a mismatch.

GL: It did, it did. When I came, I knew, I probably told you this story last time around, that's one of the reasons I came in fact, I knew I'd be dealing with students who really needed a lot of help and didn't have the background. I probably told the story, but you can erase it from the tape, that first summer before the school opened.

MG: Going down to Princeton.

GL: Well, yes, but there was another story. I probably told that one, too. We did little preliminary classes in the summer just to get a feel for it, to have the kids get a feel for it, and we were driving down somewhere. I said to one of the kids, "Well, you know you owe me a paper," and he said, "Don't hold your breath." I knew what I was getting into. I didn't know whether I was equipped to handle it, and I don't think I was. I don't think any of us, who had research ambitions and so on, really knew how to do it.

MG: One of the things Paul Clemens talked about in the article he wrote about Livingston was that in the first month that Livingston opened, there was a walkout in Professor Vesterman's "Study of Literature" class. [Editor's Note: Molly Graham is referring to the article entitled "The Early Years of Livingston College: 1963-1973: Revisiting the 'College of Good Intentions'" by Rutgers history professor Paul Clemens.]

GL: Oh, yeah. I don't remember the details of that. [William] Vesterman's is a complicated story. I couldn't re-create it, and I don't think I want to. Vesterman was self-consciously and deliberately very old-fashioned in the way he taught and very authoritarian in the classroom and no-nonsense, and he also had, in his character, probably a tendency to bully. His relation to students, except for a very special kind of student, was not good, nor was his relation with a lot of the faculty, too. Yes. The thing is that a teacher like that on a different campus, I don't know that it would have caused a walkout, but on Livingston, to see a professor come to class everyday wearing a tie and a jacket [laughter] and not accepting any kind of back talk or whatever, it caused a lot of problems.

MG: Was that what they were walking out over?

GL: I don't know all the reasons. The thing is that Vesterman was singular. I don't think there was another faculty member in Livingston like him, who was so uncompromisingly rigid in the way he chose to teach, and his personality was not charming. All of us tried, it was pathetic, but all of us tried to make the kids like us. Vesterman never tried. He's just a different species, so it didn't surprise me. I had another faculty member, people didn't walk out on him, and I really admire him. I liked him a lot, but he was uncompromisingly intellectually serious. My son actually for a year or so went to Rutgers, and he said, "This guy is the best teacher I've ever had."

MG: Can you say who it is?

GL: I can, yeah. His name was Ron Christ. He's a very, very interesting guy. Actually, he's one of the few people who was friendly with Vesterman. Christ had very, very high standards and intellectually he didn't take any nonsense, but he was much more, what can I say, humane. What happened with him was not that there were walkouts, but that he attracted to him a certain kind of really intellectually interested student, and they thought, like my son, that he was the best. He was very good, but I think those two were the only two in the department, God knows in the rest of the school, they were the only two in the department who were rigorously traditional. I guess that would cover both of them, although they did it in very different ways. I really admired Christ. I thought he was an exceptional teacher. In fact, Ron Christ sometimes spoke to me about my son's problems in a way that showed he was really very understanding of his students. I admired Christ. [laughter] I understood why the students would have walked out on Vesterman.

MG: Did you have to get involved at all?

GL: I should have. I don't think I handled Vesterman well. I was the chair of the English department at the time. It isn't like he broke any rules or anything. I didn't quite know what to do to keep him under control. I understood that he had fights in the parking lot with students, I'd heard that, literal physical fights. I don't know that talking about Vesterman gets you into anything central about Livingston itself, except that the kind of reaction he evoked was probably greater at Livingston than it would have been at a more traditional school.

MG: I just did not know if it was omen of what was to come, because it happened the first year.

GL: I don't think so. I really don't think so. I think he's still teaching there, for all I [know]. I'm pretty sure he's still teaching there. He would be probably in his seventies now or something.

MG: How did you become aware of a professor's teaching style? Did you observe classes?

GL: No, we did not observe classes. We observed classes when graduate students, TAs [teaching assistants], taught, but we didn't actually observe each other. Livingston was gung ho on getting teacher evaluations, so we got those. It was actually small enough and intimate enough in its very strange way that one pretty well knew who was any good and who wasn't and what their peculiarities were. It's true that we didn't do [observations], nothing systematic, except student evaluations. Vesterman, for instance, hated student evaluations. I was skeptical of them, too, because can these kids who don't know anything or who are just learning really tell about the [professor]? They can say things that will reveal stuff about his behavior and so on. We took those extremely seriously and paid more attention to those than the rest of the University did, which was another problem.

MG: One other thing I was not aware of until I read Paul's article was that three Livingstons were planned originally.

GL: I didn't know that. That was actually before me.

MG: Okay.

GL: Lynton, who were the other folks involved in that, the first sort of vice dean was a guy named Warren Carrier, a very interesting guy. I do know that when Livingston was first conceived, it wasn't conceived as it opened. That's part of why there were all these Ivy League-style hirings as well. They were thinking of Livingston as an intellectually advanced place and not as a place that took up the battle cries of the 1960s, but it became that latter. [Editor's Note: In 1968-1969, Warren Carrier served as associate dean, professor of English and comparative literature and chair of comparative literature at Livingston College. In 1969, Carrier became a dean at San Diego State University.]

MG: I bring that up because that was alluded to as one of the reasons why Livingston "failed," that there was not the institutional or state support to fund those two other colleges that were envisioned.

GL: Oh, yeah, not that Livingston would become different kind of college, but that there would be [other colleges built on the site in Piscataway]. Yes, I did know that. I don't know the ins and outs of funding problems, but you've heard that they were serious.

MG: That is what it sounded like, so maybe there was some resentment. It seemed like it was on both sides, that Rutgers and Douglass felt that some of their funding would be spent on Livingston.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

MG: I did not know if you felt that tension, too.

GL: Well, there was great tension among the colleges, really serious tension. I am not a belligerent person, but I remember backing the chair of the Rutgers English department into his sink. [laughter] There was a lot of snootiness and nastiness about Livingston. I think it was bad for the University as a whole, but it was also bad for Livingston because it made Livingston very defensive and it made people like me defend things in Livingston that they otherwise would say have to be changed. There was great tension. When I arrived, the sentiment of the culture of the colleges and of the community in which Livingston was located was that this was a black college for intellectually disabled students, and it felt really racist to me. A lot of the objections to Livingston were legitimate, but they were things that ought to have been able to have been ironed out. The general cultural perception of Livingston was that people were sort of scared, "Livingston's got black people. Wow, what could happen?" That lasted as long as Livingston in its original state lasted. It wasn't easy. It made me angry all the time, and it made me defend things I probably wouldn't have defended or I would've made compromises on. [laughter] I do remember the Rutgers chair. We were otherwise friendly, but the cynicism, and it wasn't racism I guess, but the cynicism about Livingston just infuriated me. It wasn't good.

MG: It seems like the campus' design and architecture fostered this sense of insecurity.

GL: Clearly, we were the slums. [laughter] We were mudflats. I was totally isolated from the rest of the University, and the kids didn't want to come over and for good reason. Why would you want to live in a mudflat? [laughter] Then, all the stories about stuff that went on in the dorms, and you've heard all of that stuff. It was very bad, and they were self-confirming. The criticisms ultimately got confirmed by the activities on the campus. The heartbreaking thing for me and for many of my colleagues was that we thought it would work. We would bring these really bright, progressive-thinking kids together with first-generation students, and they would work it out together. These white progressive kids, they didn't become racist, that would be unfair to say, but they were overwhelmed by racial difference and they didn't know how to cope with it. All these talents were just sort of shattered. A lot of those students were the ones who worked with Ron Christ. The really fresh-thinking, well-educated kids from middle-class homes in Long Island and so on, they flocked to a really smart teacher like Christ. There were other such teachers, maybe not as good as Ron, other such teachers around, so they could find, if they were careful, they could find teachers. It would end up that the classes would be segregated anyway. The white middle-class kids would go to one kind of class, and the black kids would go to another class. We didn't know. I said that last time. We just didn't know how to do it.

MG: You talked last time about the kidnapping that took place on campus, and I was reading about the thefts that were going on.

GL: Right.

MG: It had to do a lot with the tunnel systems.

GL: Right.

MG: I was curious if there were incidents of sexual assault on campus.

GL: Well, that's interesting. I don't remember any, but that doesn't mean that there weren't. A lot of stuff happened that I didn't know anything about. Sexual assault was not one of the things that people were talking about. I can't remember an instance of that. That's more in the news these days. I assume since Livingston was part of the real world, there was some, but I don't [know]. People didn't complain about it. I'm just trying to think whether there were any faculty who got into it. No, I don't think so. You didn't come across anything?

MG: No, I have not read any reports. I just thought it seemed likely.

GL: No. It was really racial. There was no question that it was racial and the deep cultural differences.

MG: I also have not heard a whole lot about Vietnam War protests on campus.

GL: Everybody was up in arms about the war. All of Rutgers had that sit-in. Do you know what year that was?

MG: There were a number.

GL: There was a very big one that our brilliant president, Mason Gross, brilliantly short-circuited. That was University-wide, but on Livingston Campus itself, I don't remember any particular one, no. [Editor's Note: Mason W. Gross served as the president of Rutgers University from 1959 to 1971. Dr. Levine is referring to the takeover of Conklin Hall by members of the Black Organization of Students in February 1969.]

MG: I had also read that admitted students were allowed to be part of both the planning process and then the governance, and I was curious how that worked.

GL: Not well, but, yes, they were. I now cannot remember. Just hang on one second.

MG: Sure.

GL: I found, aging and yellow and brittle, that article. Somewhere, I found it, and I put it back somewhere again. There was an article about a big organizational meeting of the students and the faculty together and planning committee, but I can't remember the details now. It was a very big event. I spoke at it. There were several founding faculty who spoke at it, but it was the result of the governance by both students and faculty. I did find this old yellowing thing, which you might want to read, when I went to Stanford, which was right after I had just about resigned. They interviewed me about Livingston College, and you'll recognize some of the stuff I'm saying now was in there. You might be interested in that. This is a Stanford newspaper. It must have been 1975. I don't know where this turned up. It's an interview with me about my experience at Livingston. We did have the governance problems. I don't have a clear enough memory. I remember lots of big upsets and this very large meeting with the whole college, but I don't remember what it was for. There was an article I came across the other day, rummaging through the garbage of my past, I don't know where it would be. That would tell us something about what was going on. I'm sorry I can't remember the details.

MG: That is okay. I was curious about the code of conduct for Livingston. It was a little bit different and looser than Rutgers. Students could have pets and paint their walls.

GL: Yeah, we had doggies in the classroom. [laughter] I didn't like that. [laughter] You saw what Lucy just did. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine is talking about his dog.]

MG: That is the sweetest.

GL: I think I told you that one of the reasons I did come to Livingston is that, committed as I was to doing something useful, I also wanted to cover my rear end and they had a very good graduate program. Now, I remember teaching in the graduate program, and one of the students had a dog that she brought all the time. We made the dog stay out of the room. [laughter] That was on the Rutgers [College Avenue] Campus. Did that mean that it was possible also for Rutgers students to do it?

MG: I do not know.

GL: There was a kind of looseness, but I don't know what the actual legal limits were. To have a dog come in, I wouldn't have been surprised. [laughter] No dog ever disrupted one of my classes. You see, I attracted more white students than black students. Students came to me because they wanted to be English majors in the old-fashioned way. This is a similar subject. Livingston courses were four credits, and the Rutgers people really resented that, because, in fact, our meeting times weren't all that different. It was a commitment to more engagement, one-on-one engagement, which turned out on the whole not to happen.

MG: Yes, you said the teachers took advantage.

GL: A lot of them did, yeah.

MG: I also read that the Malcolm X house was established before even classes started for the year.

GL: Yeah, yeah. Our radical, chic dean was very supportive of that. He had all these great [ideas], I'm not being critical of him because we were all in the same boat, but he wanted to do something that would recognize immediately our commitment to racial recognition and absorption of that into the whole texture, so, yes. We did talk last time, I remember, about the horrible confusion of that first day when the students arrived, and the black students wanted to be with the black students. All the plans were just blown right out of the water immediately, so whatever good, culturally-beneficial ideas Lynton and the others had, they had very little relation to reality.

MG: Was the Malcolm X house set up for all the years at Livingston, or was it just that first year?

GL: I don't remember. It didn't actively impinge on my life at Livingston, so I don't know how long it survived.

MG: Maybe this is related to what I asked you earlier about governance, but there was an academic assembly set up.

GL: Yes.

MG: It had student representation.

GL: Yes, it was a meeting of the academic assembly that I'm talking about.

MG: Okay.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

MG: The students protested because they felt white students were overrepresented.

GL: Something like that, yeah. I really don't remember the details. I remember being very nervous trying to negotiate between the different parties and me being a sort of representative of old-fashioned authority and wanting not to be. I remember being deeply uneasy, but the details of why and what was going to happen I don't remember. You could find it in *The Targum* I would guess.

MG: Probably.

GL: Somewhere, whatever year that would've been, probably '70-'71, something like that, you could find a description of that whole event.

MG: Okay. Were there LGBT groups on campus?

GL: No. If there were, I didn't know about them. No, that's much more recent. Don't forget, this is forty years ago.

MG: I knew in the 1960s, there was the Student Homophile League at Rutgers.

GL: Yes, yeah. There were gestures towards the recognition of homosexuality. Simply, there were a lot of homosexuals not on the Livingston faculty so much, yeah, even on the Livingston faculty, but on the Rutgers faculty. Most of them were more or less closeted. It was historically so far away. It may have been the initial moments in the movement towards what's happened. The Rutgers English department was well known everywhere as having, this is silly to say, important homosexuals in the faculty, and one of them, David Kalstone, became famous, but it had nothing do with the politics that we recognize today. In fact, in the '80s, as we were moving towards some de-closeting and all that sort of stuff, the homosexuals I knew on the Rutgers faculty simply didn't participate. It wasn't a thing on the campus at all. No, the answer is no. There was none.

MG: One other thing I read about in Paul's article was that the teachers could be kind of flexible with where and how they taught. Allen Howard was teaching inside dormitories.

GL: Yes, oh, yeah. There was a lot of that, and people would take classes home. Livingston did act out some of the things it wanted to do, and there were some wonderful relations between students and faculty. Did you ever get to talk to Dave Leverenz?

MG: He was interviewed not by me but by my colleague Will Buie.

GL: Oh, I see.

MG: I think they had a really great conversation.

GL: Dave is a wonderful man, and he loves students. The students loved him. He was totally committed to them. I don't know whether he held any classes at his house, but no unconventional way to gather students would have bothered him at all. I suppose I overdo, because so many of us were so disappointed, I may be overstating the failure, but there was

really great stuff and great faculty who were as committed to their students as the college pretended to be. [Editor's Note: David Leverenz taught at Rutgers for sixteen years and served as chair of the English department at Livingston College from 1975 to 1980.]

MG: I pulled from Paul's article a list of the negative things and a list of the positive things.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

MG: Maybe we will get through the negative things, and I will mention some of the positive.

GL: Okay.

MG: One of the things in Paul's article was backed-up sewage, chlorinated water, not enough hot water, blackouts, poor transportation, limited hours at the library and health services, bad food, and destruction of the landscape.

GL: All of the above.

MG: Yes.

GL: It was hard. Lynton, after Woodstock, when the college opened, he gave the spirit-of-Woodstock talk, you know, there were people lying in the mud and sort of joining together, holding hands and singing *Kumbaya*. Yeah, the thing is that those physical limits actually have a significant effect on morale and education. Yeah, all of that was a problem. There was only one really adequately functioning building, and that was Tillett Hall. [Editor's Note: The Woodstock music festival took place in Bethel, New York from August 15 to August 17, 1969.]

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MG: We were just talking about some of the pitfalls.

GL: Yeah.

MG: There was a library on campus.

GL: Yeah, there was. It was a very inadequate library, but there was a library. I'm trying to remember whether it was there the first year. It was either there the first year or very shortly thereafter. I didn't use it much.

MG: Some of the positive things included the music on campus.

GL: It was terrific, yes.

MG: African dancers and drummers. There was a gospel choir. I know there was a great jazz program, too.

GL: Yes.

MG: I have been interviewing Larry Ridley.

GL: That's right, yeah. Lynton prided himself on that jazz program. These people were really good. Didn't they eventually move to Mason Gross or to Newark or something? [Editor's Note: Larry Ridley served as chair of the music department at Livingston College from 1972 to 1980.]

MG: The Institute of Jazz Studies is at Newark.

GL: That's right, yeah.

MG: I have only interviewed Larry once. He gave me about forty-five minutes, so we have got to continue the story. Can you talk a little bit about the Puerto Rican studies department?

GL: Not very well, no, I can't. The short answer is no, I can't.

MG: How long were you at Livingston before you left for a year to go to Stanford?

GL: Well, I was there in '68 before [it opened]. It opened in '69. I was there in '68 before it opened. I was involved in the planning, and then '69, '70, '71, '72, '73, so it's five. [What is the date of this?]

MG: Here we go, January 1975.

GL: Okay. I went to Stanford in '74, which means that I was there from September '68 to June '74. That's five-and-a-half years or so. I wasn't there for the initial planning, but I was brought the year before it opened to plan for the opening year. I stayed chair until '74.

MG: Well, tell me about that year away and what you were doing in California.

GL: Okay. I don't know how far we got in our last narrative. [laughter]

MG: We did not talk at all about your time at Stanford.

GL: The decision to go to Stanford for the year followed my decision to leave Rutgers. I had been sort of psychologically broken by all of this. I was really deeply disappointed in Livingston and deeply disappointed in myself, and I knew that I had to do something else. I think I told you that I accepted a job at another college that was totally committed to teaching, and that was dumb personally because although there wouldn't have been half the tensions that there were at Livingston, there would have been a bunch of nice, white middle-class kids who would like what I do. I was trained to be a research scholar, and I love teaching graduate students, which I could do at Rutgers, but that was so mixed up with all the rest. Did I tell you this? I probably did, but in any case, I took the job at Purchase [College, the State University of New York]. Then, I got a call from Stanford, saying, "Would you come for a year?" I said, "You bet." Losing a very good friend, I canceled my commitment to Purchase, and I said to Rutgers, "I'm going away for

a year. I'll come back." "Okay." I knew if I came back, I was going to come back primarily as a graduate teacher and not to save the world. I went to Stanford, and it was a really, really important year for me because it allowed me to breathe again, to rethink what had happened, to tell people who asked [laughter] what happened and what didn't happen. It was very interesting that Stanford itself was recovering from a really brutal experience of its own, where a faculty member named Bruce Franklin, who is probably still teaching at Rutgers-Newark, a good Americanist scholar but a genuine radical, hands-on, and he was a faculty member at Stanford and he was caught with guns in his attic or something. That was the year before I got there. They took away his tenure and fired him. This is all in the aftermath of the '60s, late '60s, post-'60s stuff. [Editor's Note: Stanford University fired tenured English professor H. Bruce Franklin after a faculty advisory committee found that he had incited disruptive behavior at an anti-Vietnam War rally in 1971. In 1975, Rutgers-Newark hired Franklin, and he has been the John Cotton Dana Professor of English and American Studies since 1987.] When I went to Stanford, I went to a place that was in psychological turmoil itself, even though it was a totally elite place. For me, it was really interesting because I'd go from faculty member to faculty member, a lot of people became friends, each one would tell me a different version of this horror story with Bruce Franklin. I got to be the outsider sort of looking, instead of the insider getting crushed in one way or another. At the same time as all of this stuff was going on, I found myself teaching students unlike Rutgers students. Rutgers has a lot a very good students, but you're not going to find a class where there's nobody who's a bad student. Here I was. I had never done that before; I never did that again actually. I would teach a class of a hundred kids, and they were all good. It was just a matter of how good they were. I said, "Holy mackerel." Whatever I said, at the undergraduate level, whatever I said, everybody either understood [or] would talk to me. It was relaxing, because I was actually doing something I really enjoyed and the kids liked it. The pressure was intellectual. There were a few emotional crises. Rich people get crises, too. It was just a much more unequivocally comfortable thing to do. The graduate program, I still have contact with a bunch of the graduate students I taught there. They liked me, and I liked them. It was a year of cleaning the soul. [laughter] It was a retreat. My relation to the '60s at that point was just listening to the faculty who were all upset about what had happened the year or two before. Then, they would ask me, "Well, what about your?" So, I told them. It was putting it all behind me. Since I always have this odd conscience, which makes me do things that aren't as pleasant as other things, [laughter] I had sort of mixed feelings, like, "What am I doing? I'm leaving behind all the stuff I'm committed to. I don't want to teach in a school where nobody needs me, because they're all smart anyway." Yeah, I do. I went there thinking of this as a kind of vacation or way to pull myself back together again, not to speak of the pleasures of the California climate. The winter in Palo Alto is not bad. Have you spent any time in California?

MG: Only on work trips.

GL: It was a great year. It was really terrific. My daughter met her best friend there in middle school or whatever it was. My birding interest had really just begun, and what a great place to do it in. My life became really pleasant in a way I wasn't used to. I didn't think that's the way life should be even. By the middle, I remember this happening to me, by a strange fluke, this was really quite funny, because the culture of Stanford was kind of old-fashioned and the chair was a gentleman who didn't bother a lot, they asked me to do the Christmas party. I was living in a house of a guy on leave, a very nice house. We had the party, and in the middle of the party,

the lemons ran out for the drinks. I said to myself, "I can go outside and pick lemons from the tree," which I did. I said, "This is not bad. You could actually live here." I actually thought, which I didn't, I absolutely did not think that when I went out there, I mean, it was more to clear my mind than anything else, [I thought], "I wouldn't mind being here." Then, I realized I wasn't going to be offered a job, not because they didn't like me [or] even didn't want me because it was clear that they did, but because I hadn't made the research breakthrough. If you're going to get a professorship at Stanford, you have to have a bigger CV [curriculum vitae] than I did. I didn't mind going back to Rutgers, because the whole burden of my work changed and I became more graduate teacher than undergraduate teacher, but I thought I could actually live in California. I wouldn't mind that, Palo Alto. If I had done it then, I would've got there just before Silicon Valley exploded. I could've bought a house for half a million, it was more than I can afford at the time, but I could've bought a house for a half a million. It would be worth five million now.

MG: California is beautiful.

GL: Yes. It depends on where you are. I know California quite well now, because I've been out a lot. Palo Alto itself now is so precious. You couldn't buy a bathroom there for a million dollars. It's insane, totally insane. It was very comfortable living. We made friends. We'd go into San Francisco. It was half an hour, forty minutes. It would be summer in Palo Alto, and it would be freezing in San Francisco. The whole California thing, it was the cleansing experience I wanted it to be, but it also put in my head, "I've got work to do, and it's work that I really want to do." It's not that I didn't publish. I did publish during the Livingston years, but not the way I would have if my balance had been towards graduate programs and not with all the administration that goes with Livingston. I came back, and my life changed when I came back. I was no longer an administrator. I felt that I was only marginally involved in the complexities of the Livingston experience. It seemed to me that Livingston as an experiment, for students applying, Livingston became the least attractive of the colleges. It wasn't that I wasn't sad, but I had sort of cut the emotional cord. I think even there might have been one year there where I was acting chair. I can't remember exactly. I could look up my CV and see. It wasn't that I wasn't involved at all, but it was just really different. I became increasingly involved with the graduate program, which is where I stayed for the rest of my career at Rutgers. Stanford actually made that possible. I was extremely lucky that Stanford called me, because I shouldn't have gone back to experimental undergraduate teaching. It was dumb. My career took off. I became successful in the more conventional way.

MG: Walk me through that. I know you were publishing a lot of books.

GL: Yeah.

MG: I am curious about that research, those books, how your career evolved, all those kinds of things.

GL: Really?

MG: Oh, yes.

GL: I'm not sure why you want to know it, but that's okay.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

GL: My focus [in] research is Victorian literature. I always kept up my Victorian literature connections. Did I ever talk to you about *Victorian Studies*, the journal? [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine served as an English professor at Indiana University from 1959 to 1968, during which time he worked on the journal *Victorian Studies*. *Victorian Studies* is an interdisciplinary journal dedicated to the study of British culture during the Victorian era.]

MG: The journal, yes.

GL: Yes, my academic career began.

MG: In Indiana.

GL: My work at Indiana in the direction of research and so on, that's why Poirier invited me to Livingston. He wanted somebody who could do the research stuff that he respected. I had always kept up those connections. I gave a few talks, and I published a little bit. I wrote reviews and all that sort of stuff. Once I came back from Stanford, I had the time for really focused, extended work. The career breakthrough came, jeez, when was that book published? [Editor's Note: Richard Poirier served as an English professor at Rutgers for over fifty years and founded the literary journal *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*.]

MG: Which one?

GL: *The Realistic Imagination*.

MG: 1981.

GL: '81, right. The career breakthrough came with that book, which was accepted probably a year before that, so '79-'80, which is four years after I came back from Stanford. That sort of set me up. That made my career, and then everything got easy in the discipline. From then on, I found myself with enough time, that's right, the arrangement with Rutgers was also very generous, I could get leave. It worked out that I would win some kind of fellowship, and I got a Guggenheim, I got a NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities], I got a Rockefeller, and each one of them in effect gave me a year, which is not bad. It's the sort of research career that I had dreamed of at the beginning, but it came with the interval [laughter] of Livingston. I'm not sorry I did Livingston, but I wish that I had known more than I did. In any case, that's where my career has gone, and I've been publishing a lot. I've established myself, I have to say this, I shouldn't, now I'm an old guy, and I think it's fair to say I'm no longer the guy in Victorian literature that people will look to. That's okay; if you get old, you get old. People still respect me. I went to a conference a couple of years ago. I went into a meeting by myself and sat down, and some woman came up to me and she said, "Are you George Levine?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "You're a living legend." [laughter]

MG: Tell me what went into *The Realistic Imagination*, the kind of research and work and what the book was about.

GL: Really? [laughter] For many years, I'd been reviewing books and so on, but my focus of attention had gone to the Victorian novel. This is sort of arcane. The developing critical culture had been very critical, negatively critical, of the idea of realism. Victorian realism was out. I had written my dissertation on George Eliot actually, who was the quintessential Victorian realist, and I tried to rethink it in a way and to insist on how it could be compatible with the critical norms of the time. [Editor's Note: Born Mary Ann Evans, the widely respected and unconventional Victorian-era writer George Eliot is best known for her works *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, and *Middlemarch*.] In effect, *The Realistic Imagination* talks about the way in which realism is not simply an imitation of the real thing out there but part of the literary tradition and it entails imagination and creativity and so on. It took four hundred pages to get it out, [laughter] but that's crudely speaking what it was about. I still get excited about this stuff. I still love to read it, and I'm going to be giving a talk. I'm trying to get reengaged almost as a therapy, so I'm giving a talk on *Middlemarch* next summer at a big conference. I just reread *Middlemarch*. Now, I just received a manuscript. A new book is coming out about George Eliot, and I'm going to be reviewing it. What happened in my career, that it's very interesting to me, is that as I finished the work on *The Realistic Imagination*, I realized almost everybody I was interested in among the Victorians was very interested in Darwin, and I had never read Darwin seriously. [Editor's Note: English naturalist and writer Charles Darwin traveled around the world for almost five years on the HMS *Beagle*, during which time he conceived of the theory of evolution through natural selection. Darwin wrote notes about his ideas of evolution in 1837, but it was not until 1859 that he published *On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection*.]

MG: Why were they interested in Darwin?

GL: Because he changed the culture. How could you not? It's not that they all read him, but it was impossible to be alive in 1870 and intelligent and not realize that a whole way of looking at the world was in the process of changing. I then plunged into Darwin, and I've been doing that now for, well, that would be from the early '80s to now, which is thirty years.

MG: I am curious about that process, you have a literary mind, and so adopting a scientific one.

GL: I was very nervous about that. I was always interested. When I first started my career, a friend of mine and I put together a little book for Norton called *The Scientist vs. The Humanist* [in 1963], which is an anthology of essays about the relationship between science and [literature]. I was always interested in it, but scientifically I was a moron. [laughter] I really didn't know much about science, but I had an enormous respect for it. My scientist friends, including the psychologist who went to Columbia, always made fun of me. [laughter] I sat down and read Darwin seriously, instead of anthology snippets. I said, "This is not only really interesting, it's well written." I got hooked. I've been hooked by two Victorian writers in this way. One is George Eliot that I wrote my dissertation about, and the other is Darwin. I've been rereading and reading Darwin and about Darwin for thirty years, and that got me into reading

about evolution and evolutionary psychology and evolutionary biology. I would say more than half of what I've read over the last thirty years has to do with that stuff. Do you know about the science wars? I guess it was in the '90s. There was a big explosion. Science writers became very cynical and satirical about humanists writing about science and were very hostile to post-structuralist criticism, and this made a big fuss. There was an enormous brouhaha about one scientist who wrote an essay for a cultural journal that was really gobbledygook, but the cultural journal published it as though it were really a serious [piece] and didn't know that what it was saying didn't make any scientific sense at all. The journal was *Social Text*. Actually, it was being partly published out of the CCACC [Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture at Rutgers].

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: Tell me about this article and this debate.

GL: I have a copy of it. I actually have an essay in that issue. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine leaves the room and is still talking.] I didn't realize it was going to be [in that issue]. I think he teaches at NYU [New York University]. He teaches in New York, named [Alan Sokal], who sent the article to the journal *Social Text* [in 1996]. The basic argument was somehow that science confirms a post-structuralist way of looking at things. It's something like that. It was written deliberately as a way to expose the stupidity of these cultural folk who are critiquing science and don't know anything about it. It was a very, very big thing. It made even the front page of *The Times*. It really was the height of the science wars. A lot of post-structuralists and modern criticism tried to show that science was only a cultural creation like any other and that it was not simply a registration of what the real is but is controlled by various biases and so on. That's the drift of the thing that this was trying to parody. There were long discussions of this that made the intellectual journals, and it even made *The Times* and other papers for a while. That was the apex of things, and things have quieted down a lot now. There is the deep cultural hostility to post-structuralist criticism. I got into fights here with a mathematician about these things. Ironically, in the issue of *Social Text*, which I can't find in the mess in my room, I had an article in which I was warning my humanist colleagues to watch what they were doing, you know, "Be careful." I've never been able to go the full post-structuralist way anyway. In the same journal where Sokal is actually getting away with showing how we don't know what we're talking about, I was saying, "Watch out, you may not know what you're talking about." [laughter] That was a big deal. I got involved with that. I wrote a letter to *The New York Review of Books* that took that up in great detail. I didn't write an article for them, but there were a whole series of letters about this. I'm not sure exactly why I got into this. One of the things I felt when I found myself really interested in Darwin and in science is that I can never, from my perspective and my knowledge, I can never make scientific claims. I don't know squat. I know what Darwin says, but I also know that Darwin was wrong a lot and all that sort of stuff. What I was interested in was Darwin's cultural impact. My interest in him grew out of my interest in George Eliot and other writers and so on. I began writing a book about Darwin and culture after the publication of *The Realistic Imagination*. I published a couple of essays. I was feeling my way around. A friend of mine named Gillian Beer, I don't know whether you've ever heard of her, Gillian is now Dame Gillian, and she's one of the most prominent critics in England. She invited me to Cambridge. Did I tell you about this?

MG: The first time we met, yes, but tell me again.

GL: Okay. [laughter] She invited me to be a fellow at Girton College in Cambridge, where she had taught, or I guess she was actually still teaching there. I guess the years from '74 to '86 were really pretty cool for me, but in any case, she knew that I was working on Darwin and she invited me. I had a fellowship there, and my wife and I had an apartment in the middle of Cambridge. We had a really wonderful, great, creative year. I was busy scribbling my stuff about Darwin. [laughter] They asked me to give a lecture to the English department of all of Cambridge University, all the different colleges. I was very pleased, and I had my essay ready. Gillian had a book on Darwin, which wasn't out yet, and she said the galleys would be coming one of these days. The galleys came about a week before I was supposed to give the talk. I was all excited, "Wow, this is going to be fun," and it was devastating, because every idea that I had had that I was going to deliver, it was all there, everything was there. I couldn't rewrite it or anything, so I had to give this talk. Gillian and I were the only ones in the room who knew that she had done it before and better. It was perfectly successful, but I realized that I couldn't write what I was writing because she had already written it. I had to change gears, and I shifted focus in various ways so that my book looks like it's not hers. [laughter] It was an incredible experience. It's the only time that I've had to change course, because I had been anticipated. Usually, just a minor adjustment will take care [of it]. It very often happens that when I'm working on something, it turns out, lo and behold, lots of other people are also. It's in the air or whatever, but usually I've managed to get by. This time, I had to change a lot. Part of the irony of this is, although Gillian became internationally famous and one of the most famous critics in the world, when you read any literary book about nineteenth century culture, they will talk about me and Gillian as being the initiators of a certain kind of criticism. I don't mind being set next to her, but it's really ironic that she wrote the book [laughter] that I was trying to write. I wouldn't have been able to do it as well.

MG: Was it a coincidence that you were sharing the same ideas?

GL: Well, it's not really a coincidence. For me, everything in Darwin was new and fresh. He's really interesting to read. I could see where some of it would be boring or the details that folks like us wouldn't want to pay attention to, but I was astonished at how interesting it was as a read. I do believe that one of the reasons that it was so successful at the start is that it's just really readable and interestingly readable. For me, it was all news, but when you look at the stuff and certain things leap off the page, I said, "Well, I've got to write about that." Well, she read it too, but before me and she wrote about that. I think it was literally true that every quotation that I had, every main idea that I had, she had already done it. Anyway, it didn't, in the end, impede my career. If anything, it helped it, and I've been sort of the Darwin guru among literary types, except for Gillian, who is the guru of gurus.

MG: When you start to research Darwin, do you start with *The Origin of Species*?

GL: Yeah, I started with that, *Origin of Species*, yeah.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

GL: It is the most accessible of his books, but of course, it's where the story gets told most fully, you know, the theory gets most fully elaborated. You've got to do that. He was already very well known, although not super famous, for his book about his voyages around the world, *The Voyage of the Beagle*. That was a very popular book in its own time, and it's obviously less technical, so that's very readable. If you read *The Voyage of the Beagle*, while you might get a sense of how he worked as a scientist, you wouldn't get evolution by natural selection. The only books that literary lay culture really spends much time on would be *The Voyage of the Beagle*, *The Origin*, and *The Descent of Man*, although it turned out that his most popular book was his last book [*The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms*], which was about vegetable mold and worms. [laughter] It's a delightful book, as odd as it is, just considering how worms change the world and how they turn the soil and how they actually have intelligence. I was just reading a new book today which invokes that. There's a book about animal intelligence that I'm reading now. That's the kind of thing that Darwin led me to. It talks about how Darwin recognized intelligence in worms, and he did. It's fascinating stuff, and I've been really more or less obsessed with evolution and the whole thing. When this culture says that evolution is only a theory, whew, it's very bad on my stomach.

MG: I am curious if you got to know Darwin himself, not just his work.

GL: Yeah, yeah. I'm thirty years of saturation in Darwin. People also read his autobiography, which is kind of thin, but it's got lots of juicy stuff. Darwin, of all the famous world historical figures we know about, Darwin is one of the very few who was a nice guy. It's fun to write about him, because he was a loving father. He was very neurotic too in his way, but he was a very generous man. He was very humble. He's not like what you expect a superhero to be like. It's great fun writing [about him]. His character, for anyone interested in nineteenth century history, is well known, and he's just a good guy. Yes. The humility actually, in his heart of hearts, he was unmovable. He was very strong, but he recognized the possibility of limitation all the time. The humbleness of his character comes out in the way he actually wrote the book. Most of *The Origin of Species* is given to trying to address problems with his theory, "Why might this not work? Why might this not work? Here's how I'd explain it." It sets up so many defenses, by the time you're finished with it, you don't know how to get him. It is a kind of reflex of his character.

MG: You had started to say that a couple years after *The Realistic Imagination*, you started to write about culture and Darwin.

GL: No, no, I started to write about Darwin. I mentioned the book that preceded all of this right at the beginning of my career when I did that collection on science, *The Scientist vs. The Humanist* it's called, just to remind myself that I've always been interested in it. I was actually very interested, in the mid-'70s, I got very interested in [Mary Shelley's] *Frankenstein* and partly because that is also about nineteenth century science, about the possibilities of [insert]. There is a kind of continuity to my career, which I can figure out when I look back. It wasn't what I was thinking. That's right. *Frankenstein* fits into *The Realistic Imagination* actually. I think the first chapter is about *Frankenstein* or the second chapter. I've been thinking about science without knowing anything about science since I became a student, so it's not really an aberration. It's a

kind of natural growth. I've been careful on the whole not to make scientific claims, although I take it as a given that evolution and the essential lines of it, as Darwin describes it, are real.

MG: Birding seems like a natural extension.

GL: Absolutely, it all connects, yeah. I guess my birding actually started in [1972]. Ah, we missed that with Livingston.

MG: You spent a year in England, but I could not figure out when that fit in.

GL: When I was figuring out the five or six years, it was '72 I had a leave. Livingston was [opened in] '69 [and then] '70, '71, so it would have to be '72-'73, I got a leave. That's right.

MG: How come that was not the break or the breather that Stanford was?

GL: I'm trying to remember. I had a wonderful time that year. It was when I was introduced to [birding]. What did I do in 1972? That's a long time ago, isn't it? What did I do in 1972? I could look at my CV. That would tell me. It wasn't that I didn't publish at all during the Livingston years. I guess maybe '72-'73 allowed me to do it. I'm so curious. Let me get my computer.

MG: Sure.

GL: I'll look at my CV. I published one book before I went to Rutgers, which made me respectable.

MG: Was that *The Boundaries of Fiction*?

GL: Yeah, *The Boundaries of Fiction*, yeah. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine's book *The Boundaries of Fiction* was published in 1968.] It says, this is interesting to me, I was professor and chair of the Department of English, '68 to '74, like we said. I remained at Livingston from '75 to '79. I was acting chairman [in] '77-'78. That's right. Then, there's this whole reorganization thing at Rutgers, and I became the chair of the [unified Department of English], all of the different departments from Rutgers, Douglass, Livingston. What other ones?

MG: Cook.

GL: Cook, right, and the evening school [University College]. I was that in the transition years, and then I became chair of the reorganized department as it exists today. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine is discussing the reorganization of the faculties of Rutgers-New Brunswick's undergraduate colleges into the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) in 1981.]

MG: Can you talk a little bit about that transition, what that was like?

GL: Yeah.

MG: Was it chaotic?

GL: Yeah. I guess that's the other big thing in my Rutgers career. Of course, there was the Stanford moment when I felt released and I came back and was dutiful but not terribly active. Then, they began talking about reorganization, which meant, you know, every department, the Livingston department, the Rutgers department, the Douglass department, they all had the complete range of faculty. You would have your Shakespearean in each one of them. You would have your nineteenth century person in each one of them. There was an enormous faculty, and the University said, "This is a waste," which it was actually. Then, there's also the segregation of the colleges. Why shouldn't someone that goes to Rutgers College be able to take courses at Douglass and so on? This whole reorganization was planned over the dead bodies of a lot of faculty who were very upset. I suppose if it had happened five years earlier, I would've been opposed to it, too. I would take it as part of the racist rejection of Livingston, but I saw what imbalances there were and I saw how Livingston wasn't doing what it should have been doing and how the Douglass faculty, a lot of them were sort of segregatedly female. [laughter] It's hard to explain, but I'll explain it a little bit. I saw that it would be both economical and useful all around. I agreed to sort of chair the transition and then when the transition happened to be the chair for three years. There was a lot of opposition, but the University, the administrators, were pretty strong on this. I could've been and probably was by some people described as a fink, you know, who gave in to the administration and so on, but most of the sensible people I respected agreed that this was something that would be good if it happened. It was a messy transition, because by the time you got all the English departments together, I can't remember the exact number, but I'm sure we had over 120 faculty. Now, the faculty from what I understand is about forty-five, which maybe has carried it a little bit too far. In any case, I remember one of the women on the Douglass faculty calling me and saying, "I will not teach a class with men in it." I said, "Then, you can't teach here." She resigned. It was extremely interesting. I think it was good for the University. It allowed the University to consolidate its intellectual strengths. It minimized the difficulties of the separate colleges with their imbalances. I think it helped Livingston College a lot, in part because it virtually eliminated Livingston College but at the same time it left the space over there. They had a dean. I was pleased. I thought it was a good thing to do. All of that reentered me into the whole administrative activity of the University, so I felt that I was really doing something useful again aside from doing the research that I love to do. I was very busy. I presided over, as it were, the decimation of the English department, not decimation, but the consolidation, so I could teach at Douglass College or at Livingston College. Everybody could teach anywhere, and all the students could [take classes at each of the colleges], I guess that's the way it is, yeah. It certainly was not that before. That had a big effect. For instance, not that I'm happy from this distance with the fact that Rutgers is part of the Big Ten, but I think if it hadn't been for that consolidation, that could never have happened. The other major activity of mine within, well, there were several, within the University was, I guess I was still chair, there was a committee to oversee all the graduate programs at Rutgers. They used to call it the Gorenstein Committee in the name of the first chair, and it's become something much more bureaucratic sounding. It was a crucial committee. We literally evaluated every graduate program and had people come in and talk to us, and we gave reports to the provosts and the president. That too was an attempt to consolidate and to increase the intellectual power of the University, and it was a very successful, very demanding committee. We would get reports, elaborate reports, from every graduate program. It's difficult,

I mean, I'm in the English department, and they tell me that the physicists have x number of grants. We've got to be able to talk to each other. There were physicists, chemists, everybody on that committee. [Editor's Note: Mathematician Daniel Gorenstein served as a professor at Rutgers from 1969 until his death in 1992. He headed the Gorenstein Committee, which was tasked with evaluating graduate and professional programs at Rutgers. The committee became known as the Committee on Standards and Priorities in Academic Development (CSPAD) and later the Committee on Academic Planning and Review (CAPR).]

MG: Was it the chairman of each department that was a part of this committee?

GL: No, it wasn't necessarily the chair, although now that I think about it, everyone whose name I can think of immediately was a chair. I wasn't always a chair though. I was a chair in my first year on the committee, but I stayed on it for quite a while. Do you know that's really interesting? I didn't put that down on my CV. Why is that? I have my [time] as chair. I didn't put it down in my CV. I don't know what they end up calling it. It has a big bureaucratic name.

MG: I know what it is. There is an acronym with five letters. I wrote it down in my notes.

GL: Yeah, I know it was an acronym, but I have no idea, graduate something or other.

MG: Yes.

GL: Yeah.

MG: CSPAD.

GL: That's it. [laughter] Absolutely, that's it.

MG: Committee on Standard and Priorities in Academic Development.

GL: That is it. Is that on my CV? Where did you [find that]? Well, it doesn't matter.

MG: I do not know where I found this.

GL: I was the second chair. After Danny retired as chair, I became the chair for at least two more years, maybe three.

MG: It was Professor Gorenstein who had founded this committee. Was it his idea, or was he tasked by the University?

GL: No, he was tasked by the University, yeah, yeah. He was great, Danny, super guy. Nobody but Danny could have organized it in such an efficient way. It was quite remarkable. I felt like a fraud when I became the second one, because he had set up the system in such a way that all I had to do was make sure that the system worked. I remember sitting in meetings where he was pushing towards this, that and the other thing. It was a very, very interesting and I think creative [committee]. I don't know what's happened to it now, but I assume that it's still doing its thing.

Faculty resented it, because it was an outside evaluator, “Who are you to tell me about my grants or what I should do with my graduate students?” It really forced everyone to do an accounting job, “What’s happening to your graduate students? What’s the normal time to degree? How many grants are you getting?” I should really put that on there, except I don’t remember the exact dates. It had to be in the early ‘80s when I was chair of the reorganized department. There was an explosion of money. It was the most flush time in my time at Rutgers. The University got a tremendous amount of money to develop interdisciplinary activities, and those interdisciplinary institutes have become really important in the University now. That was all part of the same kind of initiative. In fact, it’s what led to my next phase of my Rutgers career, as I’m looking at my CV here. It’s really interesting; it’s old history now. The University got so much money for interdisciplinary research that the president said, “We should do something in the humanities.”

MG: Who was the president at the time?

GL: Bloustein. He got together some of the most famous people in the humanities and social sciences, Dick Poirier [in English] and Horowitz in sociology, and Kenneth Wheeler was the provost. I can’t remember all of them. I don’t know exactly how it happened, but I was given the charge to develop a humanities center. In 1986, that’s when it happened. In 1986, it was then called CCACC. It’s now CCA. [Edward J. Bloustein served as president of Rutgers University from 1971 until his death in 1989. Kenneth Wheeler became the provost of Rutgers-New Brunswick in 1972.]

MG: What was the second?

GL: [Editor’s Note: Dr. Levine makes the sound, “Ca Ca.” CCACC stood for the Center for the] Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture. That name was given to me by Nat Pallone. I remember that.

MG: Who is that?

GL: He was a vice president. Vice president for what? I don’t know, but he was vice president. I was very unhappy with it. We used to call it “caca.” [laughter]

MG: What were you unhappy with?

GL: The name.

MG: Okay. [laughter]

GL: No, no, I was very happy with the [center]. That became the center of my life at Rutgers after that. I didn’t move out of the English department, I was always in the English department, but my major activities and my major connections from ’86 until twenty years later [were at the center]. From ’86 to 2006, I ran the center. I shouldn’t have done it that long. That was my bad actually.

MG: Why do you say that?

GL: Because I ran out of energy and new ideas. You shouldn't have anybody sitting in one place like that for that long. Ten years is long, and then I should have thought [about leaving]. In fact, fairly early on, I began giving the real headship to different people. My greatest pride with that was that I was under pressure to build the center with all the famous names on the faculty, and I knew the famous names were not going to invest much imagination or energy into it. I looked for really smart, interesting up-and-comers, and I got a lot. Unfortunately, I got such good ones that they almost all, after a few years, went to major universities. They were the real intellectual energy of the place. I could always count on it. We had an executive committee where we gathered to discuss subjects and things to do and so on. I think about it even now. Bruce Robbins went to Columbia. Sue Gal went to Chicago. Andy Abbott went to Chicago. I clearly got great people, and they all became famous [laughter] and went elsewhere. In the meantime, the center was doing all kinds of really good things. I stayed too long. I feel that I stayed too long. Nobody was complaining, but I didn't invest in really new thinking. It just became, "Okay, this is what we did last year. We'll do this." It was a good thing but again too short-lived, near the end of my time, there was a guy in the English department who really was one of the smartest people I've ever known, not necessarily the most lovable but the smartest. We brought him [Michael Warner] in. I knew that I was nearing the end anyway, and it would be important. He came in, and he did all kinds of new things right away. He shortened the name. He said, "George, I hope you don't mind, but I really want to shorten the name." He said, "The CCA, Center for Cultural Analysis." I said, "That's beautiful." [laughter] They should have done that years [ago]. From the start, I didn't like the name, and I just sort of [said], "Well, they gave it to me. What am I going to do?" He just said, "Let's change it," and we did. Then, we got the website going, and we had all sorts of stuff going that I had only barely [begun]. It was time. It was a great thing for me, because it got me out of the simple narrowness of the English department and put me in contact with all these really great people. [Editor's Note: Michael Warner succeeded Dr. Levine as director of the Center for Cultural Analysis in 2006 and held the post until 2008. Warner is currently the Seymour H. Knox Professor of English and American Studies at Yale University.]

MG: The people who were coming through, was it a post-doctoral position? Were they faculty?

GL: Well, the people that I was talking about were people that I put on the executive committee. They were either late assistant professors or early associate professors whose careers were about to explode. They were great. Sue Gal has become a major anthropologist. Andy Abbott is one of the most important sociologists in the country, and Bruce Robbins is one of the most famous humanists. He does all sorts of stuff. The geographer [Neil Smith], he was such a good friend, and died. I was shocked when I heard about it. He [was] a brilliant guy. He went to CUNY. People kept coming and going, but along the way, they contributed a lot and they brought new people in. They had connections around the country, so when we wanted speakers, they would say, "Oh, she's great." We got a lot of really good events out of these people. That's how my career ended here. Oh, no, there was one other thing. That's right. Before the whole administrative structure of Rutgers changed, there was a provost of Rutgers-[New Brunswick], I don't think there is anymore, and he asked me to be associate provost. I didn't really want to do administrative work again, aside from the center. The CCACC was always in danger. I wanted

to keep it as an independent entity, not influenced by any department, not even the English department. I fought and fought for that. Every year was a new battle to do it. I said to the provost, "Yeah, I'll do this, but you have to understand that I'm doing it because I want to protect the center." I did that for three years. That was very interesting. That was as close to the center of University administration as I got or [laughter] ever want to get, but it was interesting. [Editor's Note: Renowned geographer Neil Smith, who was Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Geography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), died in 2012. Smith served as a geography professor at Rutgers from 1986 to 2000, during which time he chaired the Department of Geography.]

MG: Which three years were those?

GL: '93 to '96.

MG: Who was the president then? Was Bloustein still president?

GL: No.

MG: Was it Lawrence?

GL: I think it was that moron. [laughter] Yes, it was Lawrence. The provost's office had to spend much of its time defending itself against him. He was really bad, really bad. I did do one thing else. I organized a group of faculty to try to get rid of Lawrence. That was not a gratifying job. Of course, that meant that I would never [advance in the administration], because we couldn't get rid of Lawrence. Some people on the, what do they call the board? [Editor's Note: Francis L. Lawrence served as the president of Rutgers University from 1990 to 2002.]

MG: Board of Governors.

GL: Board of Governors. Some people on the Board of Governors gave us to believe that they would support a change, but when it came to it, they didn't.

MG: Would it have been up to them if they could get him out?

GL: Yeah. Nobody wanted to do it. It got ugly. I didn't really mind; I just hoped they wouldn't ruin the center because of it. That meant that my usual activities outside of the department and the center weren't going to happen anymore. Actually, it's better for you not to do those things. [laughter] I always had this little streak in me, which is part of what made me go to Livingston in the first place, I felt a responsibility to do constructive, nitty-gritty work to make things better.

MG: Were there any repercussions for this kind of campaign?

GL: Well, I was not punished, except I was excluded.

MG: That is punishment.

GL: Yeah, it's punishment. I had a lot of disappointments with people. There was one guy, one of the most outspoken faculty against Lawrence, I will leave his name unspoken, who was nationally famous for his cultural criticism, I don't even remember what department it is, but he was one of my biggest supporters. The day before we were to have some event, he calls me up and he says, "George, I'm sorry, I can't do it." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because it would really damage my program." That was really disheartening. Nothing happened. Lawrence lasted far longer than he should have, and it's amazing he didn't drag the whole University down. I think he did a lot of damage. I lost touch after McCormick became president. I don't know what year that was. [Editor's Note: Richard L. McCormick served as the president of Rutgers University from 2002 to 2012.]

MG: Mid to late 1990s.

GL: Yeah, I think it was the late '90s. By that time, I was starting to fade out. Almost all of my work after that, I stayed with the center, but it was in my discipline, giving talks and writing books and stuff like that.

MG: You had mentioned Provost Kenneth Wheeler.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

MG: One of the questions I wanted to ask about Livingston was that in 1973, there was an occupation of the administration building, where George Carey, Kenneth Wheeler and some others were held hostage overnight.

GL: Oh, jeez, I had forgot that.

MG: The demand was to fire Luis Nieves, the dean of student affairs.

GL: Now that you say it, I remember that that happened, but I really don't remember the details, and I wasn't involved. Why I wasn't involved, I don't know, but I wasn't. What year was that?

MG: 1973.

GL: I was probably on that leave in England. [laughter] We just saw that that was the year I was in England.

MG: Okay.

GL: Yeah, yeah, right.

MG: It is just kind of amazing that in such a short period of time, so much happened, demonstrations, sit-ins, walkouts, kidnappings, people being held hostage.

GL: That's why I broke. Broke might be the right word. I just couldn't deal with it anymore. I'm just an ordinary, respectable, middle-class guy, and trying to save the world and being that at

the same time is not that easy. Marge and I went to a filming on campus of a then-famous [movie about the] revolutionary *Battle of Algiers*, and the audience was full of students. I'd never been in a theater where there was more activity from the audience than from [the show]. It was cheering and whatever. Marge and I were stunned. I'm sure I told you the story about the poetry reading, right?

MG: Yes. I have one last question about Livingston. There was a new dean in 1974, Emmanuel Mesthene.

GL: Yeah, Mesthene, yeah. Nobody liked him either. [Editor's Note: Emmanuel G. Mesthene served as the dean of Livingston College from 1974 to 1977.]

MG: He was the one who said out loud that Livingston was a failure.

GL: Yeah.

MG: What was his tenure like?

GL: It was very bad, but I can't give you details. Nobody liked him. He seemed to come from a totally different culture, and his argument that Livingston was a failure, which in the long run of course you see I agree with, was very disturbing for people in the midst of it. All I remember is that there was total resistance to him. Nobody wanted to talk to him; nobody wanted to deal with him. I don't remember the details of his [time as dean]. Somebody in my department said that he had been in the CIA or somebody in his family [had], and that was [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine makes the sound "uh uh" meaning that it was unacceptable.] What year was that?

MG: 1974.

GL: My memory just won't re-create the details, but I remember that we were all in resistance to him. The good guys and the bad guys were all in resistance to him. I don't know how he got the appointment either. Was he immediately after Lynton?

MG: That is what I thought.

GL: Yeah, I think so, yeah. That would be right. I'm sorry I can't tell you. Paul might have a better historical sense than I do. All of this is just personal. I remember not wanting to deal with Mesthene and not liking him, but I don't know why. [laughter]

MG: I started asking you about the first time you went to England, which was the first time you got really interested in birding. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about birding and the role it has played in your life and then a little bit about your memoir.

GL: *Lifebirds*. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine's memoir *Lifebirds* was published in 1995. His wife Marge illustrated the book.]

MG: Yes.

GL: Well, it's not all that interesting. It folded into my life in what became an interesting way, but just by the sheer fluke, I had this leave in England. My son became friends with a kid in school, and it turned out that this kid's father, who has been a very dear friend of mine ever since, was a birder. My brother had been a birder, but I thought that was silly. You go out and you get frostbite and what the heck is this all about? We got together with this other family, and for my son's birthday, his friend's father volunteered to drive us out to some woods in Wales. I thought, "That's lovely," so I'll do that. I drove, and the three of them were birding. For me, it was sort of comic. They'd say, "Wait, stop, Green Woodpecker," and they'd leap out of the car. It was great fun, but I didn't know what they were all excited about. This kept up for the rest of the year. When we got back, I thought a nice thing to do with my son would be to go birding, so I did it a few times. Then, he lost interest, but he obviously lost interest because I [was doing it]. [laughter] It was an oedipal thing. On a recent trip we took last year, we went to Costa Rica together, my son and I, in a group, and he explained to the group why he had stopped birding and he said it was really oedipal. [laughter] I got really interested in it and started to go out with the father of David's friend. It's hard to explain. I'm not very good in the outdoors. I'm not a good scientist and I'm not a good outdoorsman, but it was thrilling to suddenly [be able to recognize birds]. I remember a few silly instances when I went out by myself when my friend wasn't around in the early days and the first time I actually worked out what a bird was on my own and the first time I remember seeing a Goldfinch through my binoculars, I said, "What a spectacular bird!" It seemed huge, and then I realized it was a Goldfinch. It's around in the backyard all the time, and it's just amazing. There were these endless discoveries and excitements about birding. My son stopped going with us, but I would go with this friend. Unfortunately, he moved to Vermont a few years ago, but we still get together at least twice a year to do birding, even though neither of us can walk anymore. [laughter] It sort of opened a whole world of life that is just right around the corner, you don't even realize it, like these vultures here. Not to get pedantic, but when I started birding, those Black Vultures wouldn't have been here. They moved up from the South in the last decade. Now, in this town, Atlantic Highlands, there's a whole bunch of them. They hang out a lot down by Burger King, and now they're landing in the yards around here all the time. When I started, there were only Turkey Vultures, which are still here. The excitement for me in those early days, there were two kinds of vultures, and I can tell the difference. They're both black, but I know by looking at them, they're different. This started, let's say that was '72, and my Darwin interest started in about '80. When I started to read Darwin, there's a wonderful line in his autobiography, I can't remember who he's alluding to, but he says, "After reading this book, I wondered why everyone didn't want to become an ornithologist." I said, "You're right, you're right!" I wonder why everyone didn't want to become an ornithologist. The whole mystery of bird speciation, it's a big deal for a birder. When I started birding, for instance, in this part of the world, there's a bird called the Junco that turns up in the winter and it's gray. There is on the West Coast an Oregon Junco. First, I went to the West Coast, [I said], "Oregon Junco." I wrote it down. Then, the following year, I read they're not two species. They're one species. They're both called now Dark-eyed Junco. I have to go to my list and say, "It's a race not a species." That kind of thing is really interesting. Now, with DNA and all that sort of stuff, it's become in a certain way more complicated but more certain. The distinction in speciation, now I can think through Darwinian eyes about what the heck is happening. The whole world just sort of changes when you see that. My birding, which I meant to keep entirely [as] my private therapy just got absorbed into my life, and it makes it

easier for me to read evolutionary biology just with the minimal experience I have checking out the birds and noting their behavior and so on. As for the memoir or whatever is it, I had some very moving, exciting experiences. A lot of people I knew and a lot of friends just humored me, you know, “Really, George, why are you doing this? Why would you want [this]?” I really felt I have to tell them, [laughter] so I wrote a little essay describing my first sighting of the Prothonotary Warbler, that’s the first chapter in the book, and in order to do that, I realized I have to tell story. I have to talk about the people I was with and how I identified it and so on and so on. I realized that whenever I wanted to talk about a bird, I had not necessarily a story but some important segment of my life, so that talking about the birds meant also talking about my life, and it became more about my life than I had probably had intended when I started. It’s a very personal book. It’s about me, obviously. It’s about the things I value, and it’s about the excitement of those birds. I mean, [the dog] gets all excited about vultures. I do too, actually. That’s remained with me. Paul and I, Paul is the guy [I was talking about], we used to be out at the crack of dawn and we wouldn’t come back, in the summertime or in the spring when the sunset is late, we’d be doing it from five in the morning until eight at night. The only stop we would do, we would sit on the car and look at birds and eat our sandwich or drink something. Now, we get out late, and we have a big lunch. [laughter] When we actually see something, it’s still exciting.

MG: It is nice that your son has gotten involved again.

GL: Well, he hasn’t really, although he wrote me what is a very moving letter today. He told me about a book, which I’ve just begun to read, which is called *Beyond Words* [by Carl Safina] and it’s about animal intelligence, and he says it’s a wonderful book. I started to read it. Then, he wrote to me, he said, “It’s changed my way of being, particularly with animals.” His wife had a dog, and he married into the dog. He said, “My relation to the dog has changed.” It’s really thrilling to imagine the intellectual and emotional life of an absolutely different creature, because they’re not different. They’re just on a continuum, which Darwin would tell you. This is something that I’ve been reading about for a while. This book looks like it’s a really good book on the subject. It really moved me, because my relation to nature and animals changed too with Darwin. Darwin teaches you right away, and some of what he wrote has always been mocked by scientists because it’s so anthropomorphic, but he’s anthropomorphic because he knows that there’s an absolute continuity, that their brains are the same as our brains, except with a few accommodations of molecules and so forth. It really changes things. I did finish a book on Hardy, Thomas Hardy, who’s a bleak novelist, but he’s an extraordinary nature writer, and he said that the experience of reading Darwin has taught us to expand the range of our love beyond the human to all living creatures because they’re all like us. That’s part of what this is, and birds fascinated me before I ever started thinking in any serious way except how pretty they were, because they’re so different. They don’t make sounds the way we make. They obviously don’t live the way we live. Their limbs seem different, but they’re not. The difference was what was so astonishing, and yet they’re beautiful and they’re somehow connected. The sense of your being connected and their being so different is really important. It’s not intellectually coherent, but it’s important. That’s the story.

MG: I think I have gotten to the end of my questions, but I am disappointed because I have been really enjoying our conversations.

GL: Well, that's very sweet. When you asked me if I would be interviewed about Livingston, I thought it was going to be about Livingston. I don't get a chance, except when I visit a shrink, which I don't do, to talk about myself so much. It's very strange. Listening to those tapes was a very odd experience. I was listening with fascination. I could imagine someone really finding out stuff by listening to what to me is just ordinary life.

MG: Yeah, that is why we do these life-course interviews is so someone who is interested in your scholarship can learn a lot, or someone who is interested in the early years of Livingston. Your children will appreciate the family history and everything in between. That is why I do this. I think it is so valuable.

GL: What happens to all these oral histories?

MG: Let me pause this, and I will explain it all to you.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

[Editor's Note: Following conversation belongs somewhere else in the interview. Check for possible recording discrepancies or missing text.]

GL: I hired Nikki [Giovanni] and I hired Toni Cade Bambara. I guess I mentioned those at some point. [Editor's Note: Writer and social activist Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995) taught at Livingston College from 1969 to 1974. Nikki Giovanni, a renowned poet, writer and activist, began teaching at Livingston College in 1969.]

MG: Yes.

GL: It must have been the first week of term when they were both there, I walked in and I saw Toni and I said, "Hi Nikki," and she said, "All us niggers look alike." It was very painful. I probably have talked to you about her. She's one of the extraordinary people I've ever met. Nikki, I never got to know all that well.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

GL: I don't know that we're going to find anything.

MG: It is just a missing year.

GL: The only book I published roughly around that time or a little bit later was one collection of essays about Thomas Pynchon, who became an enthusiasm of mine for a while, but maybe there are articles. Just let me look and see. [Editor's Note: *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, edited by George Levine and David Leverenz, was published in 1976.]

MG: Sure.

GL: It makes a lot of sense. It's not that I didn't publish anything; I was working on stuff that almost all eventually went into *The Realistic Imagination*. I published a bunch of essays on

related subjects from 1972 through '76, about six or seven essays. [It is] not that they all went into the book, but they're all on the subject. That's what I was doing. I was buried in Livingston for those three really hectic years or four years, and then I got free to develop a project that I'd been thinking about. I can see that the project lasted from 1972 until, when did I publish it, in '81, you said. Yeah, it was published in '81. Probably from 1972 until 1980, I was actually working on that book. Jeez, it was a good thing it was successful.

MG: Thanks again, George. I look forward to staying in touch. You have been a great person to talk to.

GL: Thank you. It's a pleasure to talk to you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 1/1/18