

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL AARON ROCKLAND

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins our fifth interview with Professor Michael Aaron Rockland on April 8, 2010, with Shaun Illingworth and ...

Daniel Ruggiero: ... Dan Ruggiero.

SI: Okay. Professor Rockland, thank you very much for coming back.

Michael Rockland: This is fun, guys.

SI: We want to, in this edition, cover your career as a writer. You did talk a lot about your book, the research you did for your book, on Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in Spain.

MR: In Argentina.

SI: In Argentina.

MR: Well, I wrote most of it in Spain and I started the project in Argentina, yes. [Editor's Note: Professor Rockland is the author of *Sarmiento's Travels in the United States in 1847* (Princeton University Press, 1970).]

SI: Would you mind telling us a little bit about your scholarly publications?

MR: Okay, and shall I talk about my writing in general, as my various [interests evolved]; just start with the scholarly?

SI: I think, yes, start with the scholarly, and then, we will move on to journalism, fiction, all of the subgenres.

MR: Okay. Well, after the Sarmiento book, I did a book on American Jewish literature, [*The American Jewish Experience in Literature* (The University of Haifa and the Academy of Jewish Studies Without Walls, 1975)], a series of essays on prominent American Jewish writers that was published by the University of Haifa as a textbook for the Academy for Jewish Studies Without Walls. It was an early, well, it wasn't online, but ...

SI: Like a correspondence-type course.

MR: Yes, kind of a course that they were doing worldwide. So, that was scholarly, and then, I wrote the book *Homes on Wheels* [(Rutgers University Press, 1980)]. I would say, ... after the Sarmiento book, all of my scholarly books have had myself in them in some kind of fashion. ... *Homes on Wheels* is a story of people who live in recreation vehicles in America. ... I got the idea for the book once when I was travelling west and I saw this whole line of vehicles and I didn't know what they were, and I wondered why were they going that way, like a wagon train. ... As I approached the tail vehicle, a sign lit up in their window that said, "Welcome," [laughter] and then, I slowly, for the next hour, passed, one at a time, what I now saw to be Winnebagos, and, when I passed the lead vehicle--and they had been, obviously, talking about me back and

forth, they were kind of a community on wheels--and, when I passed the lead vehicle, it said in the window, a neon sign or something went on, flashed on, it said, "Come again." [laughter] ... I thought, "Wow, this is a town, but it's on the road," and, in a sense, that's the theme of that. It's about these people who prefer to live in homes without foundations, who prefer to live on the road, who prefer to have homes on wheels. So, in a sense, while it's a scholarly book in the sense that I look at these people seriously, there isn't, you know, vast amounts of historical research. There is stuff about how the recreation vehicle, the trailer, the motor home, etc., developed and why it developed, particularly in the United States, but there's also my own involvement with these people. ... I think that's characteristic of my other scholarship, so that another book I did later, which I guess would fall basically into the scholarly category, would be the one I wrote with my colleague and friend, Angus Gillespie, who's in my department, the book *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike* [(Rutgers University Press, 1989)], because whereas it is about the history and life and engineering and everything else of the Turnpike, there's personal stuff in there, such as what it's like to live in a rest area for twenty-four hours. This was not as ambitious as the guy [Morgan Spurlock] who did the movie *Super Size Me* [(2004)], ... who was eating in the McDonald's three meals a day for a month and whose whole body [failed], all of his body systems began to fail, but I did stay there for twenty-four hours in the Joyce Kilmer [Rest Area]. ... In fact, I would stand there in the entrance and talk to people, ask them, "Who was Joyce Kilmer?" Nobody knew who Joyce Kilmer was. One person thought that *she* was an actress from Bayonne. One person got it half right, said that she was a writer, was a poet, and then, of course, Joyce Kilmer was actually a man--"A Boy Named Sue," as Johnny Cash might have said. ... We have Joyce Kilmer, of course, being very important here at Rutgers. [Editor's Note: Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918) was an American poet born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and educated at Rutgers and Columbia Universities. He died in World War I at the Second Battle of the Marne.] So, a lot of my scholarship really has been participatory, rather than combing through ancient archives. I'd say only the first book, the Sarmiento book, was really a book in which ... I'm not in there at all and I'm working with moldy, old archives and that sort of thing. There's nothing the matter with that, although I do have a strong feeling that we make a great mistake with our students when we give them a great deal more credit for looking in books, ... as if books don't lie as much as any other source of communication. We somehow imagine, "If it is in a book, it's true." Well, it is or it isn't, depending on who wrote it, and we don't give much attention or support to students who do interviews, who go out [and perform research], and, to my way of thinking, often, if you're creating new knowledge through interviewing people or experiential stuff, in some ways, that's more important. You're doing more for society than what most scholars do. ... So, I think there's been a pattern in my life as a writer of being rather suspicious of all--well, that's too strong a word, not suspicious--drawn to the experiential, as opposed to simply dusty, old archives, and somehow combining the two. ... My most recent scholarly book was the *George Washington Bridge: Poetry in Steel* [(Rutgers University Press, 2008)], which came out with our own university press in 2008, and while it's the history and engineering, everything, of the bridge, just as the Turnpike book that I wrote with Angus Gillespie was, I think the best chapter in the book is the chapter about how I climbed to the top of the tower, you know. [laughter] ... Whenever I meet anybody who's read the book, they go crazy over that chapter. That's the chapter that intrigues them, and it's the one that intrigues me, obviously. I'm rather proud to have climbed to the top, and I came home and showed my wife, because I was carrying a little

disposable camera with me, even though there are signs all over the bridge. ... Since 9/11 [the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks], you can't take pictures on the bridge, but I was with four cops and ... the two in front of me were willing to take the pictures. We climbed up the cable and, to me, that's the best chapter in the book, that chapter and the introduction, all about what the George Washington Bridge means to me and has meant to me ever since I was a child living in the Bronx, growing up in the Bronx, and, also, ... after the introduction, the first chapter is also very experiential. I was given a tour by the general manager of the bridge and taken into all the dark and secret places on the bridge that you wouldn't want a terrorist to know about. [laughter] ... So, that about, I think, covers my strictly scholarly books, and, as I say, I think that other than the first one, they have had a [personal component]. Well, I don't know, the book *The American Jewish Experience in Literature*, that was purely scholarly, I think, ... but several of the others that I mentioned were partly experiential. ... I think that's my forte, entering into the scholarship, making it meaningful to a contemporary reader.

SI: Within American Studies, was there a precedent for that kind of experiential work or was that something that you came up with on your own?

MR: Well, I think American Studies was a lot more interesting years ago than it is today, and for the very reasons that you suggest. That is, when we were new and young and embattled and saw ourselves as somehow on the barricades, fighting off the "evil" history and English departments, who we felt weren't doing cultural history, that the historians were doing political and military history, primarily, then, and the people in literature departments were worrying over commas and arcane things, you know, and both were ignoring cultural history, ... I thought we had something really special to do, but I think American Studies has become so diffuse that we've lost our way. ... Along with that, I think, is that I have slowly evolved towards thinking of myself more as a writer than as a scholar. I think I always wanted to be a writer. I was really not a great student. I was a so-so student. As an undergraduate, all I really cared about was being a jock and girls, and then, in grad school, I was twice put on probation, but, eventually, came out of it and everything went well. ... So, I think that's important, that ... it is literature ... and being a writer, ... and being an artist, if I can go that far, that really interests me. ... If there's a pattern in my writing, it's become less and less scholarly with time and more and more just thinking of myself as a writer who has a great day job at Rutgers University. [laughter]

SI: Just to stick with the *American Jewish Experience in Literature* book for one moment, how did you get involved with that project?

MR: I was invited to Israel, representing Rutgers. Henry Winkler was then our Vice-President for Academic Affairs and he was asked to nominate one Rutgers professor to go, and so, this was kind of a short trip to Israel over winter break with professors from the various universities. ... It was sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and, when we came back, they asked me if I would write this, in effect, textbook, although it's really a series of literary essays. ... They left it up to me as to which writers to pick that I thought were the most important from [the] early, very early, twentieth century right up to contemporary times, but that book came out in '75. So, that's a good long time ago now. If I were doing it today, probably, the writers would be somewhat different. It was just a nice thing that they asked me to do that. I'm not sure why they picked me

out of [all the others]. ... Maybe I was the only professor on the trip whose field was American. I'm not sure. Many of the others might have been scientists or whatever. Maybe that's why they asked me.

SI: To follow up on some of the earlier interviews, you had talked about how important Israel's creation was to you. Was Zionism something you had been brought up on or had been discussed in your household a lot?

MR: Not really. I think I said at one point that my parents were of that generation that just wanted to be a hundred percent American, and they were the children of immigrants. They were both born here and they wanted to be a hundred percent American. ... I think they grew up also in a time when one couldn't be quite so comfortable being something other than Christian in this country, and I think that was true to a certain extent when I was younger and less true today, and certainly less true for my own children. ... As I think I suggested, there were these two facts just hanging over my childhood. ... One was the Holocaust, you know, the fact that there were these people who wanted to kill me [laughter] for nothing but an accident of birth, and did manage to kill two out of every five of us in the world, and then, when Israel was created. To me, the two issues, Holocaust and the--I should say the recreation of Israel, not the creation, but the recreation of Israel, by the United Nations--those two issues dovetailed, and the fact that Israel was so menaced, and still is, has always been something that's just been very much a part of me. ... I don't even know that I knew the word "Zionism." ... Let's face it, if you grow up in a certain time and you read Leon Uris's *Exodus* [(1958)] or you see the movie *Exodus* [(1960)], starring Paul Newman, you don't have to be Jewish to love Israel. [laughter] You see that movie and you get carried away. I mean, it's a very romantic and marvelous movie, with great music, and so, certainly, Israel is one of my great enthusiasms. I've been to Israel three times. I think it was important for me to go to Israel to discover that I really was an American, [laughter] because it's almost like [African-American essayist, playwright, novelist and Civil Rights activist] James Baldwin, I remember, meeting Africans when he was overseas and discovering he definitely wasn't African. ... The same thing happened to me, that whereas I admire Israel very much and it certainly isn't perfect and it certainly makes mistakes, like any country does, it's still, I think, ... one of the few truly viable and decent democracies in the world, ... but, culturally, I'm so much an American that [I could never be Israeli]. Well, I remember, the very first time I was in Israel was in 1971, and I went with a Rutgers group.

SI: Was that the same trip that you had described earlier?

MR: ... Probably, yes.

SI: Okay.

MR: Yes; you mean with the professors that I mentioned even earlier today or in an earlier interview?

SI: Yes, earlier today, the one Winkler chose you for.

MR: No, no, that was the second one that Winkler chose me for. The very first one was [where] the Hebraic Studies Department had a summer program in Israel, just like Spanish has a summer program in Salamanca, or had one, you know. ... It was when I was a dean, actually, at Douglass [College] and I was invited to go along with these Rutgers students, kind of nursemaiding these Rutgers students. ... It was seven weeks shared between three-and-a-half weeks of travel around Israel, and all the way through the Sinai Desert, because Israel occupied the Sinai after the Six-Day War of '67, so, ... we travelled all around the Sinai, and I'll never forget this particular incident. ... I was trying to get on the bus with my wife, my first wife, and our little daughter. My sons, ... who were a little older, were elsewhere. I don't know if this is still true in Israel, but, at least then, it was part of the Israeli spirit, that buses never came to a full halt. [laughter] ... You got on the bus while it was moving and you got off the bus while it was moving. I don't mean fast, but it was [moving], so, you can imagine somebody elderly trying to get on this bus or trying to get off breaking their legs or they just can't do it, I mean, [laughter] but it was part of the Israeli spirit, like, you know, "the *Sabra* spirit." Native-born Israelis call themselves *Sabras*, which is the name of that plant, that cactus plant, that produces ...

SI: The prickly fruit.

MR: Yes, the prickly pear. We call it the prickly pear in English. In Spanish, it's called the *chumbo*, and the *sabra* in Israel, ... because the Israelis say that they're tough on the outside, soft on the inside. Anyway, that's the way these buses were and we were trying to get [on]. I was trying to get on the bus, holding my daughter and getting my wife [on], and then, trying to get on, because I only had one hand free, because I was holding her. ... The bus is moving slowly and I'm trying to get on the bus while it's moving, and I just flew into an absolute rage ... when I finally got on the bus. ... One other thing about Israeli buses, at least then, is that the bus drivers are essentially the owners of their own buses. They have a union and ... there isn't some big boss. It's part of the spirit of Israel. It's very mindful of issues of labor. The labor movement is extremely important, and really works, and so, this was this guy's bus. ... You know, from his point of view, he just didn't slow down to let people on or off, and so, when I finally got on the bus, I just flew into a rage and I grabbed the bus driver by the throat ... and screamed at him, "What the hell's the matter with you? What are you, crazy? I mean, why don't you stop the bus?" ... Another guy who happened to be riding on the bus ... was also an Israeli bus driver, and, as they say, or used to say, anyway, the bus drivers were also the tank drivers when Israel's at war. [laughter] The guys who drive the buses drive the tanks. I don't know if this is true, but this is what they say. The other guy came up and said, "Calm down," you know. We had this whole argument between the three of us and, finally, it was over and my then wife and little daughter and I went towards the back of the bus. It was really funny; all the people on the bus applauded. [laughter] They all applauded, because they thought this was a very brave act that I had done. I'm not sure how I got into that, but it dramatized to me how different I was from the Israelis. However much I might admire them, I could never be an Israeli. [laughter]

SI: We had just asked about your views on Israel and if you had been there before the trip where Winkler chose you to travel there.

MR: Yes.

SI: Where would you like to go next with your writing career?

MR: Well, I think I should talk about the other books, perhaps. I talked about the scholarly side of it. I'm not sure if, in some earlier interview, I mentioned that, at the age of sixteen, I read *Winesburg, Ohio* [(1919)], Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, [Ohio]*.

SI: Yes.

MR: I did? yes, because that was the book that really turned me on to literature and made me feel like I wanted to be a writer when I grew up. Anyway, ... in terms of journalistic books, ... well, I think one that probably is basically journalistic, although it's kind of semi-memoir, is the book *Snowshoeing Through Sewers* [(Rutgers University Press, 1994)], which is all about my crazy adventures of canoeing across New Jersey to Manhattan Island or walking across New Jersey or walking across Philadelphia or walking the length of Manhattan. It's all urban adventure, and I'm not sure if I mentioned this before, that book actually came out of a movie. Did I mention the movie that I made?

SI: No. You really did not tell us about this book, so, please tell us how it developed.

MR: Oh, well, okay. Back in 1972, I talked my friend, Charlie [Charles] Woolfolk; Charlie was Associate Dean of Douglass after I was, that is, [after] I didn't want to be dean anymore. So, I talked him and Margery Foster into getting together, so, I could get out of it, and then, later, he was Associate Dean of the Mason Gross School. [Editor's Note: Margery Foster served as the fifth Dean of Douglass College from 1967 through 1975.] ... I talked Charlie into making this crazy canoe trip to Manhattan, beginning in little streams near Princeton, and then, into bigger streams, eventually, ending up, well, spending the last night in the ruins of Ellis Island, before any of it was restored, and then, on to Manhattan. ... We made this trip and Charlie was talking about it at a cocktail party a week or so later. ... There happened to be a film director there who was listening to Charlie and said, "Well, do you think you guys would be willing to make a movie about this?" So, Charlie said, "Well, I have to talk to Michael, but I think so. Why not?" and so, he was an independent filmmaker, a guy named Clark Santee, and he asked us to write a script. ... Later, he got a grant from PBS, Channel 13 or whatever, got a grant to make a movie, and the grant wasn't that big, and so, he had his script for free from the two of us. Now, he asked, would we play ourselves in the movie? So, that's the only, quote, "acting," unquote, I've ever done. I play myself in this movie. [laughter] ... I have no pretenses about being an actor, although I can do a pretty good imitation of myself, and I do in that movie. Although it was a scripted film, it was not a documentary. It appears to be a documentary, but it isn't. It's a scripted film, and so, we made that movie in '73 and '74 and it went on television. It was repeated many, many times as a kind of summer adventure film of two crazy professors from Rutgers who decide to canoe to Manhattan Island.

SI: What was the title of the film?

MR: The title is *Three Days on Big City Waters*. The original title, and the title of the script, was *Four Days on Big City Waters*, but they ran out of money, [laughter] even though they got their actors for free and they got their script for free. There were some bit parts in the movie that are actually played by professional actors. ... We're the only amateurs, but ... it's us ninety-eight percent of the time, and we made that movie, ... which was kind of a trip. We used helicopters and all kinds of boats and a crew of people and stuff, and we didn't retrace our trip so much as we created scenes along the way, including the climactic scenes on Ellis Island. Well, when I finished that adventure, I was very turned on to the whole notion of urban adventure. ... We think that the way to adventure is to go where there's whitewater, to go to the top of mountains, and I do that also, but, I came up with this whole notion of, ... "Why not adventure into the city, as opposed to running away from the city? Why not use adventure as a means of creating community, rather than escaping from community?" and I began to do these other adventures, sometimes ... by myself, sometimes with Charlie, sometimes with other friends, whatever, and, eventually, ... most of these were published in magazines; ... mostly ... in *New Jersey Monthly*, where I continue to be a regular writer now. The magazine started in '76 and my first piece [was] called "Zen and the Art of Biking Route 1," if you notice the reference to Robert Pirsig's classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* [(William Morrow & Company, 1974)]. This is the art of biking Route 1 and staying alive, and being in a kind of Zen frame of mind. So, that appeared in the magazine in ... its early months ... and I've done a couple of features or so a year ever since, ... including several features in recent years on Rutgers football, on what it has done to the image of the University. So, that book was an adventure book and, basically ... again, I'm not sure whether it's journalism or memoir or somewhere in-between, because, in a sense, memoir is journalism. It's just personal journalism. ... I guess I should look at the list of my books here, to remember, so [that] I'm not ... leaving any out. Oh, I should say, one of the other scholarly books ... I did was the one I did with my wife, *The Jews of New Jersey: A Pictorial History* [(Rutgers University Press, 2001)]. I guess that's a scholarly book. The hardest, the most challenging, thing about that book was getting the pictures, but it is, I guess, strictly a scholarly book, ... oh, and I've done a couple of very small books, ... again, in the scholarly category. ... In addition, I edited and supervised the translation of a book called *America in the Fifties and Sixties: Julian Marias on the United States* [(Penn State University Press, 1972)], because, after I wrote about Sarmiento, I then wrote about that Spaniard who has probably written the most about the United States, who I knew, by the way, during my Embassy days, and whose son, ... Javier Marias, is one of Spain's most prominent novelists, perhaps the most prominent novelist in Spain today. So, I did that book, *America in the Fifties and Sixties*, that was published by Penn State, as another scholarly book. ... Then, I wrote several little books on American culture, in various ways, that were published by the *Taller de Estudios Norteamericanos*, the Workshop in American Studies, which the University of Salamanca and the University of Leon in Spain collaborated on. So, you see, my connections with Spain have continued from the day I left there, editing Julian Marias' book and supervising his translation. That one, I didn't translate; I just simply went over the translation. ... Two other people did the translation, I just made a few corrections and that sort of thing. And then, there were these little books that I ... published in Spain [*Que Tiene America de'Americano*' (*What's American About America?*) (*Taller de Estudios Norteamericanos*, University of Leon, Spain, 1992) and *La Cultura Popular o Por Que Estudiar Basura* (*Popular Culture: Or Why Study "Trash?"*) (*Taller de Estudios Norteamericanos*, University of Leon, Spain, 1996)]. ... That's all still, I guess, in

the scholarly category. ... Then, in terms of memoir, the book I'm in the process of completing, have pretty well completed, that will be out late this year, 2010, ... and, by the way, this has been quite a period for me, because, 2008, *The George Washington Bridge*, ... 2009, my novel, *Stones* [(Hansen Publishing Group, 2009)], and this memoir on Spain coming out at the end of the current year from the University of Valencia. I've never been this productive or this lucky, ... but it isn't that simple. I mean, it looks like I wrote three books in three years. They ... will have come out in three years, but I didn't necessarily write them ... in just three years. ... Back to that in a minute, about *Stones*, how I happened to do it, but, talking about memoir, the book I've just finished on Spain, the title it's been given, in Spanish, is ... (*Un americano en la España de Franco?*), *An American in Franco Spain*, and it's about my four years with the [American] Embassy and all the crazy things that happened, that I may have discussed earlier. I'm not sure.

SI: You did discuss your time in Spain.

MR: The thing with the hydrogen bombs and Martin Luther King and [Senator Edward M.] Kennedy and all that, in Spain. Yes, so, I just this morning got an e-mail from the woman who's translating it and who directs this press, at the University of Valencia, saying she loves it and it'll be out later this year. ... Then, I'm going to be on leave in the Spring of 2011 and they're already setting up a one-month, at least, tour of all the Spanish universities, with this book in hand, giving talks, and then, I'll give a plenary talk at the Spanish American Studies Association meeting at the end. So, ... Spain's a country I've never left, really, and I still have friends from the days I was with the Embassy. ... I had ... something to do, I think, with the creation of ... the Spanish American Studies Association, which was my job as a cultural attaché, and I love to go there because I'm always an honored guest and they always treat me [well]. They're always so happy to see me, this American who's interested in *their* American Studies Association, and there was ... so little of that when I was with the Embassy. ... Nobody studied the United States, nobody knew anything about the United States. So, this memoir ... I'm just finishing, and I already know what the next book will be, and it will be a memoir also, and it's about something I talked about earlier. It'll be about my Navy time, working in a locked psychiatric ward in Japan, [laughter] which sounds so improbable that you could be in the Navy and never get on a ship, really, and spend the entire time working in a locked psychiatric ward. ... As I think I may have said, this'll be ... both a serious and comic book at the same time. I think that's what's characteristic of my writing ... that I go for trying to be both serious and comic at the same time. I don't go for jokes, "ha-has," I don't go for that, and I don't go for being deadly serious, necessarily, either. What I'm always looking for is that cusp, that ambiguity, that point of ambiguity between ... horror and humor, and that ... psychiatric ward was perfect for that. [laughter] It was nothing but horror and, in retrospect, it's terribly funny. So, that's the book I'm going to write next. ... I will then have written two memoirs in a row, strictly memoirs, of distant pasts in my life, and that has a lot of tricky stuff involved in it, because, heck, if you wrote about something that we were all doing five minutes ago, we'd all remember it differently. So, imagine what it's like to write about what it was like when I was twenty-one and in Japan and working in a locked psychiatric ward, and nearly being murdered twice by the patients, [laughter] ... which wasn't funny at the time, but seems very funny now, you know. So, that's going to be the next book, and, after that, I have ... another novel planned. So, scholarship, journalism; I guess most of my journalism, strictly speaking, has been in magazines. ... Most of

the stories in *Snowshoeing Through Sewers* [(Rutgers University Press, 1994)] originally appeared in magazines, and then, I adapted them to make them fit together in some way, so [that] it isn't just an anthology of my adventures. ... By the way, that book has produced a lot of interest in people. A lot of the chapters in that book have appeared in the anthologies of other people. Three have already, and there's a new book coming out right now, an anthology of New Jersey writing, that has one of my stories in it as well. Well, then, there's fiction, right? ... Shall I go on with that?

SI: I was going to ask about your writing on New Jersey, but let us stick with fiction first.

MR: Oh, okay. Well, I've published two novels and, as I say, I'm planning one after the next memoir book. ... Fiction is always the scariest and most difficult for me. ... I'm not saying it is the most difficult, I'm saying it's the most difficult for me. As I always say, jokingly, "You go to graduate school, you're ruined for life. You can never write fiction, unless you're practically schizophrenic, or something, ... because it's so difficult." Everything we're trained to do as professors, and earlier than that in grad school, is ... about footnotes and ... proof, ... and fiction's all about your imagination. It's not coming from your head, it's coming from your heart, or, as I like to say, "points further south," [laughter] and I think I always wanted to be a novelist more than anything else. I don't know if I talked about my first novel, *A Bliss Case* [(Coffee House Press, 1989)]. Have I?

SI: You told us how getting it published and revising it was a very long process.

MR: Right.

SI: You also told us that it was based loosely on David Burrows.

MR: That's right, yes.

SI: Could you tell us a little bit more about how the idea came about, and the process?

MR: Sure, yes, and I don't know if I mentioned [that] I was first going to write a nonfiction study of three guys in my life, and then, I decided two of them were just crazy. They weren't interesting; they were just nuts. David was interesting, and I knew him because he was in American lit. and I was in American Studies and we saw each other fairly regularly. ... Then, he became a swami and followed this Indian guru and ... left his wife and kids and went off to India and all. ... Anyway, I dropped the first two guys from this nonfiction study and I was just going to study David.

SI: Who were the other two individuals?

MR: One was a boyhood friend who became a lawyer, really became a kind of a crackpot lawyer. ... Every cause he took up, ... and lawyers can do a lot of good, but I always thought he was taking up causes that were of very little value, and [I] finally decided that this guy was just nuts, and then the third guy really went nuts. The third guy was a graduate student friend, and

we'd remained friends throughout the years and everything, who then became a cocaine addict and ... was thrown out of the University of California, Davis, and became a full-time drug salesman. [laughter] ... I said, all right, this ... David Burrows, aka, in my novel, Sidney [Kantor] or Swami Anudaba, and his Sanskrit name is "Slave of Slaves," was really interesting. ... I started to study his group, and ... him, and he was delighted the book would all be about him. ... He didn't have to share it with the other two guys, and then, I went out to Oregon and spent about ten days on this ashram, because they had moved from India. The Indians didn't want this guru around with all his Western disciples. They wanted them the hell out of there, and so they, guru and his disciples, bought a hundred-square-mile ranch in Eastern [Central] Oregon known as the Big Muddy Ranch, where a lot of John Wayne movies were made. In fact, it's believed that John Wayne maybe got lung cancer there, because, I think, it had once been used for nuclear experiments, or something like that. I forget if that's true or not. [Editor's Note: Followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho) established a religious community that became known as Rajneeshpuram on the site of the former Big Muddy Ranch in Oregon in 1981. The community collapsed in the mid-1980s after Rajneesh's followers committed and/or were implicated in a series of crimes, including a 1984 bioterrorist attack.]

SI: In Oregon?

MR: Yes, maybe, I think; no, maybe he just smoked a lot. I don't know.

SI: Well, I mean, this doesn't have to be on the record. [Editor's Note: It has been theorized that fallout from nuclear testing on government ranges in Nevada caused dozens of cast and crew members filming *The Conqueror* (1956) in nearby regions of Utah, including star John Wayne, to eventually develop and succumb to cancer.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

MR: ... Yes, so, okay, so, Eastern Oregon, I'm sorry, Western Oregon, is the Oregon we all imagine, big trees and fog and very much like the California coast, damp, you know. All the way into the Cascades, it's green, and there's, like, a line, it's amazing, as you're going past the Cascades. [laughter] ... Up to this line, it's all green, the other ... side, brown, and so, there was a line right up the middle of Mount Hood. You could see it, and so, they bought the Big Muddy Ranch, sixty-four thousand square acres, and they began to make the desert bloom. ... They built this whole city, really, this guru and his disciples, and I was fascinated by this, you know. However, unless I've said this before, I hope not, I was on a lecture trip in South America and I wanted to work on the book. ... I had all these materials back home in New Jersey and they were, you know, tapes and interviews and file drawers, several file drawers full of stuff for a nonfiction book. ... I wanted to work on the book, ... but I didn't have my stuff with me, which was a very fortunate thing, because I began to write in the voice of David Burrows' mother, ... who I never met. [laughter] I had always been trying to meet his mother, and, by the way, this is part of Rutgers history, because *Rutgers Magazine* did a whole spread when the novel came out, did a whole spread on me and on him. It was about an eight-page spread. It was really quite a thing, paintings, photographs. *New Jersey Monthly* also did a story. I didn't write it; ... I was interviewed. ... So, I'm in Uruguay, I'm about to fly over the Andes the next [day], on Monday,

for a lecture in Santiago, Chile, and I want to work on the book, and I asked at the desk if they have a typewriter. ... They said, "Yes, we've got a typewriter, but it's missing several of the vowels." I said, "Well, that's okay. ... You know, I'll fill them in later," or something, and I went up to my room in the hotel and plugged it in and started to write. The next day, on the plane, on the way over the Andes, I started to put in the missing vowels and everything, and then, I read ... it and I said, "God, I think this is the best thing I've ever ... written, and it's not true." ... It was being told in the first person by who I imagined his mother to be. She kept ducking me. She was so ashamed of her son, who'd given up his professorship, who'd left his wife and kids, had gone off to ... follow some Indian guru. ... I put her in the ashram in India, visiting him, ... and I had never been in India. ... I kept trying to interview her and she kept trying to duck me. ... I finally reached her on the phone. He begged her to talk to me. He was very cooperative, because he thought this ... would be a wonderful nonfiction book just ... about him. In fact, he even put me in touch with all the women in his life ... if he knew anything about their whereabouts. ... I'd call up a woman and she'd say, "Well, gee, I don't really want to talk about that. I have three children now and I'm married, and I don't want to talk about that." I would say, "Well, look, it's totally anonymous, you know. I can say you're Sally Q." ... It's so funny some of the stories they would tell me about him earlier in life. That's part of what these files were, these elaborate files that I had, and, now, I'm writing ... without them. ... He also gave me the names of [his therapists] and gave me a permission letter to any shrink ... of any kind that he ever had anything to do with, and some of them would say, "Yes, I'll see you, and I'll charge you two hundred dollars an hour." I said, "Wait ... a minute, no, no, I want to take a walk with you, have lunch with you, or something like that. I'll buy you lunch, but that's it. I ain't paying you. I don't need to get shrunk." ... Some of them were willing to talk to me without charging me and they would tell me about [him], because he signed a thing, a release, saying they could talk to me about absolutely anything in his therapy with them, and he had every therapy known to man. ... So, there I am, and I'm writing in the voice of the one person, or the one important person, in his life who I never met. ... I finally contacted her. We finally made an appointment. I took the bus into New York. I took a cab over to her apartment. I got past the doorman. I got up to the twentieth floor, rang the bell, and she wasn't there. ... I sat in the hall waiting for her and she never appeared. This is a little gross, but ... maybe it's interesting. ... You could decide later whether you want to put it in the transcript or whatever. I had to pee something awful and I'm sitting on the floor, sitting because standing was worse, and I didn't know where to pee, because I had expected, when I arrived there, I would be able to use her bathroom before I interviewed her. ... So, I went down the hall, where the garbage chute was. There was a garbage chute and I opened the garbage chute and peed down the garbage chute, [laughter] which was a little bit of urban adventure there, you see, and went back and sat there and she never appeared, and so, I never met her. ... Now, in whose voice do I decide to write? the one person I don't know. Everybody else, I ... had elaborate files. ... Her, I don't know nothing, and I start to write in her voice. [laughter] ... The next day, I thought, "This is the best thing ... I've ever written," and then, I went on from there, inventing characters and creating. I mean, I felt emboldened. I thought, "You know, I think I'm really into something now. I think this is really working." ... I moved my files--we were living in Princeton then--moved my files from my office up to the third floor, and it was wintertime and it was unheated up there and uninsulated. It was freezing. This was to discourage myself ... from going to the files. I didn't want to go to the files. I remembered plenty of stuff anyway, but I saw the files as a crutch that would interfere with the

fictional process. In some ways, when you're writing fiction, the less you know, the better, the better off you are, [laughter] and, in any other writing, the more you know, the better off you are. So, I moved them up there, but I would sneak up there anyway. I'd put on heavy sweaters and sneak up and look up [a file], thinking, "I've got to stop this," and so, eventually, I decided to burn my files, right in the fireplace, just burn the files, because they were really in the way. It was like being a heroin addict. I had to go upstairs to get a fix, and the novel slowly took shape, and that's when ... I began to receive all these rejections. ... Then, I think I may have mentioned this before, that's when I wrote the book *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike*, with Angus Gillespie, to keep from going crazy, because I thought ... the novel was great, the best thing I'd done, anyway, and it kept getting rejected. I even had an agent. ... She said it was a great novel, but she couldn't sell it. ... Eventually, the twenty-eighth publisher said it was the best novel he'd read ... in a quarter of a century and he published it, and the *New York Times* put it on the "Notable Books of the Year." ... I always tell ... this story, because anybody who wants to write should take heart from ... it, because, [if] you get rejected by twenty-seven publishers, most of us are going to give up. I just didn't, and what kept me from giving up is writing the Turnpike book. I had something to do that I knew how to do and I had a contract for and I knew would be a success, and so, I was trading off from fiction to nonfiction. ... I've just done the same thing and I think it says something about me as a writer, that I often work on more than one project at a time, because it keeps me from clutching over ... a single project. It'd almost be like if you were in courses at Rutgers and you got two term papers. ... Do them both, work on both of them; they will feed each other. When you're working on paper number two, ... that's when you'll get your good ideas for paper number one, because you're not clutching about it, you're not uptight about paper number one. ... In effect, though I didn't plan that, that's exactly what I did with my novel, *Stones*, and the George Washington Bridge book, the very same thing, where I reached a certain point with *Stones* and it had gone kind of flat for me. ... I was also getting rejections now all over again, and then, I signed a contract to do the George Washington Bridge book and it just somehow took the pressure off me. For me, the major impediment to writing is yourself, is your own anxiety or stress, and your own insecurity, your own inability to believe in yourself, but here I have my, whatever, however many books I'm up to now. Well, I guess the thirteenth's going to come out at the end of this year, and you'd think I'd have enough confidence that I wouldn't have to play these little games with myself, but I still do, and they work. Heck, you know, whatever crutches you need in life, except for going up to the attic to [read files], when you're trying to write fiction, whatever crutches you need, work. Some people smoke cigarettes, some people drink a lot of coffee and I work on two projects at the same time, basically, and, ironically, one fiction, one nonfiction. So, when I felt I'd gone flat with *Stones* and all my early efforts to get a publisher failed, I wrote the George Washington Bridge book, and then, when I came back to *Stones*, [I was ready]. This is why they came out one in 2008, one in 2009. I came back to *Stones* the moment I turned in the George Washington Bridge manuscript; takes a publisher about a year to actually produce the book anyway. ... During that year, I was really hot working on *Stones*, and I was hot in terms of it was working, because I wasn't anxious about it anymore, because I had this other book coming out. So, these are little, funny games I play with myself, to keep myself from, you know, getting down on myself. It only gets a lot easier because I've had the experience so many times, but every new book presents its challenges and fears. ... There's the fear that you won't get it published and there's the fear that if you do get it published, you'll make a fool ... of yourself. [laughter] ...

You've got both of those fears, and that, you know, you hope that you won't get a review saying, "He used to write better," or something like that. ...

SI: Can you give us a timeframe regarding *A Bliss Case*, such as when you started the project and how long you were thinking of it as a nonfiction book?

MR: Yes.

SI: Then, can you tell us about the process of taking it forward as a fiction book to when it was published?

MR: Very good question. Both *Bliss Case* and *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike* came out in October 1989, and some people thought, "This guy's a genius. He came out with a nonfiction and a fiction book in the same month of the same year." [laughter] Well, I began ... the process for what eventually became *A Bliss Case* in around 1981, I'd say, writing this book, ... this nonfiction study of these three guys who were doing wacky things, or interesting things. We turned in the Turnpike book in '88; it came out in '89. ... Okay, so, I was writing it with Angus Gillespie ... for two years. So, that was from '86 to '88, I was writing the Turnpike book, and had, meanwhile, put *A Bliss Case* aside. Well, first of all, *A Bliss Case* was three different books. I mean, first, it was about three guys, then, it was a nonfiction book about one guy and, now, it was a novel, and so, that, each of those processes, took at least a year or so, and then, when it was finally a novel, I was fumbling my way. Some people have asked me, "Well, do you make up your mind what you're going to do, when you write a novel, before you write it?" I say, "No. [laughter] Maybe other people do. I mean, I have some idea, but fiction, more than any other kind of writing, for me, has a life of its own." ... If somebody asked me to write a nonfiction book on whatever subject it was, I could tell them, "Right, I'll have it for you in two years. I'll spend one year finding out everything there is to ... know about this subject [laughter] and another year writing it." That's exactly how I wrote the George Washington Bridge book. That's exactly how I wrote, with Angus, *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike*, but, with fiction, I just don't know, which is why it's so anxiety producing. ... It has a life of its own. ... That life is coming out of your imagination, but, at the same time, you have to somehow get out of its way, not impose, not have an agenda. I don't know if I've talked about this before, but *Bliss Case* is told by three women and a gay English professor. ... Did I talk about this?

SI: No.

MR: Oh, and people say, "Well, how come?" I say, ... "I don't know if I consciously made this decision, but, looking back, I know why I made ... it. Maybe, subliminally, I had to get away from myself, and these four characters who tell the book, all in the first person, helped me to do it;" it's a little bit like, I never thought of Orson Welles' movie *Citizen Kane* [(1941)], but it's exactly like *Citizen Kane*. I wasn't thinking of *Citizen Kane*. I was thinking of Beethoven. I was listening to a lot of Beethoven then and ... symphonies have four movements and a coda at the end, and that's what *Bliss Case* is. It has four sections and a chapter at the end, which sort of brings it all around, a short chapter, but it's just like ... *Citizen Kane*, people have told me. I say,

"I guess you're right. I never thought about that," certainly not while I was writing it, because you have four people telling the story in the first person and they move the story along chronologically, but they also have a different view of Sidney, or 'Slave of Slaves,' Anudaba, whatever name you want to use for him. They each have their own view of him, and none of those views are incorrect. ... The image, really, that works for me, though I didn't think of it at the time either, is: ... you blindfold four people, you lead them to the elephant and they touch a different part. ... One touches the tusks, one touches the trunk, one touches the tail, one touches the legs, and they all tell you something which is true of the elephant, but they're only getting a piece of the elephant. ... Ultimately, hopefully, you get the whole elephant by the end of *A Bliss Case*. So, that's how I [wrote it], ... these four characters telling the story, and here's an interesting ... aspect of it, I think. I was having the most trouble with Part II, which is called "Edge City," and it's told by George Smith, who's a six-foot-five former basketball star, who was in the Rutgers English Department and who's gay, and it was largely based on a guy I knew, who was a friend of mine, was our next-door neighbor. His daughter was my babysitter. We both got divorces at the same time. I didn't realize he was getting a divorce for a very different reason [from why] I was getting a divorce, [laughter] you know, and he and his wife, he and his first, ... well, his only wife, he and his wife are best friends to this day, very interesting. I couldn't exactly describe my first wife as my best friend. We get along all right; share three kids, you've got to get along. [laughter] ... So, it was largely based on him, but it was also based on two other guys I came to know during those years, both of whom were gay, one of whom died of AIDS, ... a guy in the History Department, and another one was Geoff Hendricks in the Art Department, who was the guy going around putting on all these crazy Happenings all over campus, but it was mainly based on a guy named Barrett Mandel. ... We've remained friends ... since then. ... When I talked to him and interviewed him for what became the novel, I remember him saying something like, "Well, that was before I came out of the closet," and I said, "What are you talking about?" I hadn't a clue. ... I'd known him for years and it was the first knowingly gay friend I'd ever had, because we already were friends. It was a very interesting experience. It was very important in my own development, because, up until that point, I guess I thought gay people were strange or different, or whatever, and you had to be tolerant of them, or something like that, you know. Now, it was very different. Suddenly, this gay guy was my friend. I realized this guy was just like me; he just liked boys instead of girls. So what? What was better about liking girls than liking boys? In fact, given the population explosion in the planet, you could argue that being gay is better than being heterosexual, because I've got five kids, you know. [laughter] I've reproduced too much, probably, you know, more than my share. Anyway, I was having a lot of trouble writing Part II and I gave it to him to read and I said, "Look, let's do lunch. I'd like you to read it and I'd like you to tell me, why am I having trouble with this one?" I said, "I think I'm having trouble with this because ... there's still plenty of homophobia, somehow, deep inside me that I wouldn't want to acknowledge, but it's there. ... I'm afraid that people will read the novel and they'll think, 'Well, he's not a woman. We know he's not a woman. There's his picture on the ... back of the book,' and, besides, you know, I'd be perfectly honored to be a woman. I mean, I think I'm only partly joking when I say it's unfair that only women can give birth. ... I mean, I've always been the coach, never the star, when my five kids were born." My students always laugh at this, but, anyway ... I asked Barrett, "So, what is it? I'm afraid people will think, 'Oh, okay, he's not a woman, but he must be gay, because, if he wasn't gay, how could he write like this? How could he know about this?'" you know. ... So,

we met and we had lunch, and I said, "So ... it's homophobia, right? ... I don't allow myself to be George Smith the way I allow myself to be the three women." He said, "No, that's not what it is. I don't think that's what it is. That's not your problem." So, I said, "What's the problem?" May I use an "F" word, the "F" word here? ...

SI: Sure.

MR: Is that all right? because this is what he said.

SI: Yes.

MR: He says, "You don't get it, do you?" and I said, "No, I don't. What's the problem?" He said, "It's because George is a fucking professor at Rutgers University." I said, "Oh, of course." This was, like, you know, when a light goes on ... in your head. He said, "You have an agenda in this chapter, in this section of the book, that you don't have in the other sections. You freely allow yourself to be a woman, three different women." I mean, [contemporary American actress and TV personality] Whoopi Goldberg always talks about what acting is about. Acting is the ability to be somebody else, and writing fiction, I think, is the ability to be somebody else, but especially writing the kind of fiction I write, which is character-driven fiction. It's not plot-driven. I couldn't write a plot if I tried, even though there is a kind of a plot; not a plot, but there is an evolution. Something happens in *Bliss Case* that brings it [forward], that gives the novel an arc, that takes it from beginning to end, and so, I said, "Of course, of course, I'm using this chapter to say everything I've ever wanted to say about Rutgers, good and bad. ... I have lots of good things, ... wonderful things, [to say] and I love Rutgers University, but I'm using George to say a lot of negative things about Rutgers University, too. ... I've got an agenda," and there's nothing that gets in the way, at least of my writing fiction, more than an agenda does, because it's me then, not George. I'm not out of George's way; I'm imposing myself on George, and I went home and threw the George section into the fireplace once again, a ritual burning, if you will, and wrote George from scratch. He helped me so much to see where I was trapped, and George, I think, is just as good as the other parts of the novel now, but it just wasn't [then], and I feel comfortable with George.

SI: Were the negative things that you were trying to work out in that section related to the reorganization that was happening at Rutgers at that time, or were they just general things that you did not like about Rutgers?

MR: Oh, it was more petty. It was more departmental politics kind of stuff.

SI: All right.

MR: It was small mindedness. Universities pride themselves on being places of open discussion and debate. In my experience, they are no more so than other places in life. The difference is that professors get tenure and, when they get tenure, they don't have to give a damn anymore what people might think about what they say, but, in a sense, that makes us less brave, in some ways, because we're protected. ... Mind you, I'm not opposed to this; it's made my life. It's

allowed me to be the person I wanted to be. It's allowed me to be a creative person, I think, but, you know, it was a heck of a lot more difficult expressing my point of view when I was a diplomat and saying what I really thought about the United States, ... where I thought we were weak and where I thought we were very deficient. ... I did get into trouble a few times when I was in the Diplomatic Service. Something I didn't mention, a Congressman came to Madrid and later wrote to Dean Rusk, who was Secretary of State, claiming I was a Communist. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Dean Rusk served as Secretary of State under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson from 1961 to 1969.] Jeez; it had something to do with Brazil. Brazil had had an army coup or something [in the Spring of 1964] and I was kind of disappointed that the democracy had been taken over by the generals, and he thought that was just fine. I remember him, Congressman [Edward] Derwinski, who later became Secretary, and I forget in whose administration, I think [President Ronald] Reagan's, Secretary of, either the Army, or, no, of Veterans Affairs, became Secretary of Veterans Affairs. [Editor's Note: Edward Derwinski served as Secretary of Veterans Affairs under President George H. W. Bush.] He attacked me as a Communist, really funny. So, yes, I mean, you know, the PC [politically correct] thing is really what I was after, even though PC had not emerged yet. ... It wasn't something we talked about, but ... I thought of how very much, it seemed to me, there was a kind of prevailing conventional wisdom of what was true within the university, and that the university, unfortunately--I don't mean just this university, any university--unfortunately, in some ways, was ... no more tolerant, maybe even less, of divergent opinion than other places I've been, and we've got to work on that, I think. I remember, one time, ... the Women's Studies Department wanted to have a whole thing about domestic violence and called for people to make presentations. ... I wrote them something saying, "Have I got a presentation for you!" I had a student who had done an honors thesis on domestic violence and had discovered that domestic violence was much more complicated than we give it credit for being. We basically gender code domestic violence, "male perpetrators, female victims," which I think does both men and women a disservice. The fact of the matter is, at least according to the several books that have come out, but which nobody in Women's Studies reads, it's really a sixty-forty thing. We men are mainly the perpetrators, okay, and, yes, we do hurt women more than they hurt us, because we're stronger, but, you know, ... a hell of a lot of women beat up men and men do nothing about it. ... [Television talk show host] Oprah [Winfrey] had a show on this. Good, old Oprah had a show on this, in which she had women who appeared on this [show] saying, "I don't know what it is. I keep beating up my husband. I can't help it. I beat him up, and then, I apologize," and the men would come on and say, "Yes, I don't know why I don't leave her, but it's the children and I just can't leave," and, I mean, it was just exactly, ... or almost exactly, the same thing as women have always said [about] why they wouldn't leave abusive relationships. It wasn't just me, it was Oprah, for God's sake; and Oprah is God. [laughter] She's the closest thing we have in America to God. ... I made this proposal and they turned it down. They didn't want to hear this. I was telling them something they didn't want to hear, which is ridiculous. I mean, I think, in a university, we should be considering not the conventional ideas, but the unusual ideas, you know, but, anyhow. I should talk, maybe, a tiny bit about how *Stones* happened.

SI: I just have one more question on *A Bliss Case*.

MR: Sure.

SI: How did Burrows react when it went from nonfiction to fiction?

MR: Oh, at first, he was very angry, because this was going to be his biography and, now, it wasn't anymore, but, to his very great credit, when the book came out--and, by this time, the ashram had collapsed. The guru had been arrested for immigration fraud, because he was getting all his American disciples to marry his foreign disciples, so that ... his foreign disciples could stay in the country. I mean, you know, thousands of them, and then, the Feds struck a deal, where if the guru left the country and didn't come back, they would not jail him. They would not prosecute him, and so, when he left, the whole thing collapsed. ... As far as I know, there is this ghost town in the middle of ... Eastern Oregon. The State of Oregon thought of turning it into a minimum security prison, because it's so isolated. There ain't no way out of there. You'll die, unless you have one hell of a lot of water. The nearest town, Antelope, is, oh, I don't know, about forty miles away, and it's got about seventy people in it. I call it "Buffalo" in the novel. So, I don't think they ever did it, though. I don't know. I never heard that they did it. [Editor's Note: The site later became a Christian youth camp.] Anyway, so, when it broke up, Burrow's didn't know what to do with himself. He'd left his life to become a part of this thing, which had now broken up. The guru flew around the world looking for a new place to set up his ashram and every country rejected him, because this was a big story, cover of *Life* Magazine, cover of *People* Magazine, a lot, a lot of press, media coverage of this guru and this destroyed ashram and the whole thing. ... So, other countries didn't want to let him in. He eventually, because he was an Indian citizen, had to be let back into India and he went back there and re-formed the ashram there and, shortly afterwards, died of natural causes, they say. There are some people who aren't exactly certain of that, and Burrows didn't know what to do with himself and he went to live in Guatemala, where a bunch of other disciples, sannyasins, they call them, had gone to live. ... You know, it was so cheap to live in Guatemala. He had his tiny pension from Rutgers. It was tiny because he hadn't stayed here enough years for it to get big. You know, you have a pension, it could double in one year, and then, it had doubled, ... tripled, but it wasn't that big. ... He lives off that, essentially, to this day, and, anyway, he was living in Guatemala at the time, and I believe is living back in Guatemala now, having lived in China for some time and having gone back to India for awhile. ... At one point, by the way, he asked me to help him get a job back in academia, and I did try. Nobody would touch him with a ten-foot pole. That's part of the PC/academic thing. "Where you been the last twelve years?" "I've been the member of some Indian guru's ashram." "*Adios, chico*, we don't want you." I mean, you know, because, when he was at Rutgers, he was a very interesting professor. I mean, the students loved him. He was very popular; slept with all his students, ... back in the days before sexual harassment. [laughter] ... He was in Guatemala and I sent him the novel, ... with fear and trepidation that I was about to go to court. [laughter] ... He wrote me a very nice letter back, saying he thought it was a terrific novel, and he was just commenting on it as a novel, that he thought it was a terrific novel, and I was very happy with that. His ex-wife, actually her sisters, at one point, threatened me because part of the novel is told by Elaine, who's somewhat based on his ex-wife. ... Her sisters ... threatened a lawsuit against me, and it never materialized, fortunately. ... I saw him. I hadn't seen him for about twenty years, but Barrett Mandel, the gay guy who George Smith is largely based on, and who's remained my friend, I have lunch with him in New York about once a year. We meet, talk about things, and, when David comes to New York, he always stays with Barrett.

... Barrett set up a dinner one time for me and him and David at his apartment in New York, and it was kind of wonderful. It was really kind of weird, because, first, I knew him as a colleague and, ... before that I knew him as a dean, and he was the most rebellious of the faculty. So, part of my job as a dean was keeping him in line, while trying, at the same time, to protect the First Amendment. Then, when I quit being a dean, and, ... years later, he became my subject, for many years, and, now, he was just a person. ... We were just having a good time, sitting around in Barrett's apartment in New York, smoking some good weed and talking about old times, and we were quite friendly. We were quite warm with each other, I think. I was very anxious about seeing him, even though I'd had that nice letter. Now, we were just two guys who had once been colleagues. ... So, I had these three totally different relationships, and then, he came a year later and Barrett set up a similar kind of dinner. ... I went there, ... to New York, for that dinner and he and I didn't hit it off very well this time. I'm not sure just why. It wasn't me, it was him. I mean, I was prepared to be friendly and stuff. I don't know if this was residual anger from the novel or what. He had always been, you know, "hipper than thou." ... I think he saw me as kind of a square guy. From his perspective, I probably am square, you know. [laughter] He essentially abandoned his children. I take care of my five children, and my grandchildren. ... I'm a family guy, you know. I love my wife. I live a very domestic, conventional life. If I want to go crazy, I write novels, [laughter] but he, for whatever reason, that second time, it didn't feel very good. He had some anger towards me, and I couldn't quite figure it out. ... I think he was jealous of me, because he and Barrett asked me what I was writing now and I told them about the George Washington Bridge book and I told them about *Stones*, that I was bouncing off these two ... projects, and whereas Barrett has always been very supportive of my writing; he's always said, "God, Michael, ... at your age, you seem to get more active the older you get." I say, "Yes, it's a nice problem," and ... I think David had some of the same desires that I've always had, to be an artist, and I think they never materialized. ... Then, for whatever reason, they asked me what I was working on and I told them [I was] working on these two books, and he seemed to grow angry and I think he was just simply jealous. I don't know that, but I think so.

SI: Do you have any stories about David Burrows acting as a rebellious professor from when you were dean? Are there any stories concerning that aspect of your relationship?

MR: Yes, because in the very [beginning], I was only a dean for three years; came out of the Diplomatic Service, went to work in Trenton as the Chancellor's [New Jersey Chancellor of Higher Education] executive assistant for a year, then, came to Rutgers for three years. ... During those three years, yes, we had kind of an ambiguous relationship, in the sense that, as I may have said it on some other occasion, I was kind of like a double agent. [laughter] On the one hand, I was this young guy who was against the Vietnam War, and all anybody ever talked about in those years was the Vietnam War, and things sometimes got violent, you know. They Molotov cocktailed [the] ROTC [building], right over here on College Avenue. I don't know if they're still on College Avenue, but they did, and [Rutgers University President] Mason Gross was a genius at keeping the lid on. ... Students would lock themselves in his office and he'd say, "Stick around." He'd go get them pizza, you know. He just would not rise to [anger]; he wouldn't call in the cops and that sort of thing. ... On my own low level, I was a similar kind of a person, both supportive of the rebellion on the one hand, but saying, "Hey, listen, guys, the State Legislature's going to close this place down." I mean, so, David Burrows and Geoffrey

Hendricks, Geoffrey on the artistic side, David on the political side, were like these two guys I knew very well, and, yet, at the same time, I had to keep the lid on these guys. [laughter] I mean, I just had to say, "Look, guys, you're going to bring the wrath of God down on us. You've got to take it easy here. ... As dean, I'm going to support the First Amendment to my dying breath, but you can't do some of the stuff you're doing. You can't stop people from walking into classrooms. You can't blow up buildings. You just can't do that, you know, and you can't," in Geoffrey's case, "go around campus nailing fish to every podium in every classroom. You know, you're putting a nail into a podium; that's University property. You made the whole class stink for a week afterwards. I mean, you can't do that. I mean, that's not fair to everybody else, you know." ... Margery Foster, who was my boss, ... you know, she wanted me to really, you know, lower the boom on David and Geoffrey, and anybody else who was in the radical fringe. The Religion Department, in those days, also, which had its offices ... in the basement of Voorhees Chapel, was very different than the Religion Department today. They were all very radical. I mean, they were. [laughter] I mean, they weren't just teaching the religions; they were prophets. [laughter] I mean, they were walking around in sandals and robes and it was really kind of a wild time, and so, again, my job was, in a sense, to protect them and, at the same time, try to keep the lid on things, and David was [one]. Dave would [do something], and Margery... I don't know how much she was aware of how much I was a double agent. I think I certainly didn't want her to know that I had certain sympathies for the radicals. I didn't go as far as them. ... Then, when Kent State happened, then, ... again, a four-letter word, the shit really hit the fan around here. [Editor's Note: On May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guardsmen fired on students at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, killing four and wounding nine others. Some of the students had been protesting the United States entry into Cambodia during the Vietnam War, while others had been passing nearby or observing the demonstration.] I mean, Kent State was suddenly [a major issue]. Now, things got really tough and, I mean, here, of course, these students were being shot on their own campus, were being killed, and then, Jackson State happened a couple, a few weeks later, and some more students were killed. ... Suddenly, we realized, "Wow, we are in a different place," and, for me, who left the Foreign Service not to go to Vietnam, I was in Vietnam here more than I would have been in Vietnam, in some ways. [Editor's Note: On May 14 and 15, 1970, students at Jackson State College, protesting racial harassment, were fired upon by state and city police, resulting in two deaths and a dozen injuries.] I mean, it was kind of a cultural war going on. Bill [William] O'Neill, I don't know if you guys ever knew Bill O'Neill, he retired from the Rutgers History Department just in the last year or so, wrote a book called *Coming Apart: An Informal History of the '60s* [*An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (Quadrangle Books, 1971)], came out in 1970, right at the very end of the '60s. ... Bill's quite conservative in some ways and he saw the '60s as so radical, and here on this campus, especially so, that the country was [headed for turmoil], we were going to have a revolution. ... No, we were going to have a civil war. He really thought we're going to have a civil war, that the country had split so down the middle, between those who were supporting the war and those who were opposing the war and fighting racism. ... American history was rediscovered during these years. Up until then, you know, ... I believed, I actually believed, that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and told his father that he did it and [said], "I cannot tell a lie," you know. Well, I mean, we began to realize that so much of American history was pure bullshit. [laughter] ... We began to discover that, my goodness, half the population, the female population, [had] been left out of it, and the black population [had] been left out of it, all the

minorities left out of it, and that the American Studies that I had done at the University of Minnesota as a graduate student was really "White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Male, Heterosexual New England Studies." That's what it was. It was about the damn Puritans. I mean, Spanish Catholics were here a hundred years before the Puritans; nobody paid any attention to them, you know. St. Augustine's the oldest city in America, not Boston, by a hundred years, you know. I mean, it was so [distorted] and we were [discovering that]. It was very important, I think. Part of this revolution was a revolution in history, that we were rediscovering, or we were discovering, that history was so biased. It was just, you know, a particular vision of history. So, that was part of the revolution, really.

SI: Please tell us about *Stones* and how that evolved.

MR: Right. ... While *A Bliss Case* is not autobiographical at all, other than knowing David, I mean, ... I invented virtually all of it, though it was based on, in part, an experience of the ashram and everything I could get my hands on about it, *Stones* is much more autobiographical. When my dad died, I began to do something with my mother, who still lived in my old Bronx neighborhood. I decided to do something with her annually ... that my father had done with her always, and that was to take her to the family cemeteries, family graves, all out in Long Island, in Brooklyn, Queens, and further out on the Island. My father had always done that, once a year, with my mother, and, now, he was on the itinerary. ... So, for sixteen years, I would go spend a whole day with my mother, every two weeks, which was really hard, because I had, you know, five children and my job and my writing and my house, and the roof and the dog, [laughter] ... anyway, and we would do this. ... I'd wake up early in the morning, go to the Bronx, pick her up, go out to Long Island, go to eight different cemeteries. My mother, being elderly, quite infirm, quite frail, quite overweight, getting my mother in and out of the car was a logistical enterprise, ... without her falling, the likes of which I have never quite had that much of a challenge, because, in that day, I had to get her ... in or out of the car at least twenty times. Just getting her in the Bronx, taking her back there at the end, the eight cemeteries, that's sixteen, the eight cemeteries, in and out, stopping for lunch, her wanting to stop at every, as she put it, "comfort station," which were bathrooms, that I could find here and there; in fact, maybe closer to twenty-five, and I'm alone with her. ... Anyway, we would visit all these graves and the whole experience began to work on me artistically. I began to find myself making up stories, not the things that were really happening, but, you know, just beginning by exaggerating, and then, going on from there, and, pretty soon, this thing became [an idea for a novel]. I was doing it with my mother each year, but I was also imagining all kinds of things about it, imagining things about the people in their graves, imagining a novel whose two principal characters were this middle-aged guy and his aged mother and their relationship, and their relationship to the dead and the dead's relationship to each other. One of the most difficult parts of *Stones* was getting the hell away from myself, which was much harder for me to do than ... with *Bliss Case*, and maybe I didn't do it as successfully. The protagonist is, I made him a medical doctor who always wanted to be a writer, [laughter] and the arc of the story is that he makes this [trip]. ... He learns some very strange things about his family on this particular day. ... He's done this year after year, but this day, I make it in the tenth year that he's doing this with his mother, [he learns these things]. I did this with my mother, actually, until two years before she died. By this time, she was ninety-five and it was now impossible. I mean, it was just too damn dangerous. She died at

ninety-seven-and-a-half, so, the last two years, I didn't do it. So, I did it for about fifteen years, something like that, and, with each passing year, I was both having the experience and I was standing outside of the experience looking at the experience. It was a very curious phenomenon. You're having an experience, but you're also looking at it, thinking about it artistically, and, eventually, I began to write *Stones*. I began to write it when I stopped making trips with my mother and stopped going to all these cemeteries. It was as if I was too trapped by the reality of it to imagine it, even though, as I say, with each passing year, I was imagining things and making up things and creating composite characters, or characters from scratch. My favorite chapter is one called "Cousin Artie", which was a complete fabrication. There's no connection between Cousin Arte and anybody that I know. ... It's my favorite chapter. I think it's the best chapter in the book, although maybe I think that because it's a pure fiction, but others have told me, too, they loved that chapter, which should be instructive. If indeed it might be the best chapter of the book, maybe it's because it's precisely that I have no agenda whatsoever, or that I'm not intruding on the ... chapter at all and Cousin Artie is free to run wild and be Cousin Artie, because I don't have anything to impose out of experience on Cousin Artie. Well, I went along with the book and it was moving along, and I thought that I'd have no problem getting a publisher because of the tremendous success of *A Bliss Case*, but it was too many years later. If I had written this [sooner]; it's very interesting, if you write a novel and it's a success, [it would] be a good thing to write your ... next book, to write another novel quickly, ... because ... you'll get a publisher right away. I was now the new kid on the block all over again. I said, "Hey, but my first novel was a 'Notable Book of the Year.'" "Yes, but twenty years have gone by," and so, I was starting all over again, having the same experience of rejection with *A Bliss Case*, and, during this period, deciding to write the George Washington Bridge book, and Rutgers University Press was keen on the book. Five of my books have been with our own university press, which is very rare. It's possible I've written more books with RU Press than anyone in history. I don't know. I mean, normally, when you're at a university, you don't publish at your own university, you publish at other universities, and people from other universities publish at your university. So, I'm almost like an in-house writer at Rutgers University Press, and I served for three years on the University Press Council, between books, at one time. ... So, I signed up to do the George Washington Bridge book and I loved doing it, and the same thing happened. I came out of there refreshed. I came out of ... it, raring to go on *Stones*. ... Again, this Zen principle, if you want to work on this, go over there, go somewhere else, do something else, clean your mind out about it, and that's, I guess, what I did. So, for the second time, I wrote a successful novel, finished a successful novel, I should say, and got a publisher coming out of a nonfiction experience. ... Now, the Spanish book will come out, "Spain book" I should say, will come out, in Spanish, at the end of this year, ... but I'm already thinking a whole lot about this memoir about the Navy. I mean, I've even written little pieces, almost as if I've got to keep the pump primed. I think it's really like that, for me. People say, "Gee, you're prolific," and I say, "Well, maybe so, but I think if I am prolific, it's because I have learned to keep the pump primed. ... I've become more prolific the older I've gotten, because I've learned that basic principle, "Don't finish a book flatfooted, not knowing where you're going next." [Ernest] Hemmingway would talk about that in terms of writing on a particular book. He would say, "When you're finished writing for a particular day, maybe end it in the middle of a sentence. Quit in the middle of a sentence," or, "Begin or write the first ... sentence of the next paragraph, that you've made the transition to the next paragraph. You're quitting for the day, you know where you're going," and I must say, he's

absolutely right. Sometimes, when I'm writing, I do that. I try to, ... if I know I'm going to be writing, and especially if I can't write the next day. Then, I'm going to be flatfooted if I come back to it ten days later. That's awful. So, if I've written the first sentence of the next paragraph, I know where I'm going, but even more so, the same principle applied to writing books. I'm finishing this Spain book, as I say, or it's finished, or whatever, pretty well finished, and I'm thinking about the Navy book all the time, and I'm thinking a little bit about that novel that I want to write, called *Married to Hitler*, got a great title, [laughter] but thinking about that a little bit. ... I'm determined, because I know myself, that when I get seriously into the Navy book, I'm going to be thinking about the novel more and more and more, and taking notes for it, maybe writing little pieces, keeping the pump primed. Some people think that we run out of ideas. Well, we only run out of ideas, I think, if we don't keep the pump primed. I think that what's true of writing is also true of love, that you can really love a lot of people. It starts with loving yourself; took me a long time to love myself. [laughter] That was really a project. I don't think I loved myself until I was forty. You know the old cliché, "Life begins at forty." Well, boy, it really was true with me. I began to be much more successful as a writer and happy in my marriage, ... not happy in my first marriage. ... So, now, with loving myself and, now, with loving my wife, and it goes out from there, that you could just be a loving person, I think, and there's no limit to the number of people you can love, I think, ... or feel loving towards or be loving with, and being loving is a nice thing. It makes you happy, makes you happier. Being hateful just makes you miserable, [laughter] and so, I think that writing and love are really parallel things, that if the pump is primed, you can go on and on and on. I mean, it's hard for me to anticipate a time when I might say, "Well, I'm not going to write anything anymore." ... By the way, another thing that works for me, people say, "Well, goodness, you could afford to retire. Your pension's big enough." Well, I don't know about right now; when the economy comes back up again, fully. "You could afford to retire, easily old enough." In fact, the University's trying to get people like me to retire now. It's got this policy where they're saying, "We'll give you a year;" I forget what it is, anyway. ...

SI: A year's sabbatical?

MR: Yes, "We'll give you a whole year with pay, plus, your pay of the present, plus, another thirty percent," or something like that. The University is saying to me, not just to me, is saying to anybody my age, ... "If you retire, we'll give you a fortune, and you won't be drawing on your pension in that first year," and, you know, there's a tiny part of me, only a tiny part, that's tempted, but I ain't going to do it. They could offer me ten million dollars and I wouldn't do it. Why? because I think my teaching's got a lot to do with my writing, and the two, one priming the other, you know, that [works well]. Well, let's put it this way, I'm too damn gregarious a person to sit at home and write full-time. I have a friend, Tom De Haven, who's a novelist and he also is at a university. Oh, God, he'd retire the first minute. He can't stand teaching. I love to teach. I love my students. I love coming here. Hey, this is a dream. It's the dream job. ... We only teach two classes a semester. I mean, we get all the time in the world to [write and conduct research]. We only work about eight months of the year; don't tell the Legislature that, okay. I mean, of course, I'm working the other four months also, but I'm working on my writing, and I'm working on my writing every free day at home as well. It's a dream job. You have all the freedom in the world. Somebody says, "Well, yes, but, if you stayed home, you wouldn't even

have to come here at all." I said, "But, I love to come here." So, you could offer me ten million dollars, I still wouldn't resign. That would be tempting, though, ten million dollars. [laughter] They aren't offering that much, anything remotely close to that, but I still wouldn't do it, I mean, ... because I need to come here. I need a place to go to a few days a week. I know I'm more productive having this kind of double life, the teaching and the writing. I've been on leave before. I was no more productive on leave than when I wasn't on leave, and I was often less happy. What's nice about the leave that I'm going to have in the Spring of 2011 is that, ... at least one month of it, if not more, I'll be going from university to university in Spain, ... with the Spain book, and it sounds like they're going to really roll out the red carpet. So, it's going to be a lot of fun and, you know, a lot of big boosts to the ego, and I also know I'll be writing the Navy book the rest of that time. So, I can handle a semester off. [laughter] I can handle the semester off, but, ... at the present, anyway, I don't [have plans to retire], and people say, "Well, when are you going to retire and when are you going to stop writing books?" and I always say, "I guess when I die. I don't know. That's when I'll [stop]. I don't have [a plan]." Last year was my fortieth anniversary at Rutgers, so, now, it's forty-one years, and they have ... this luncheon and the President gives you a present of some sort. This time, they gave me a chair, a Rutgers chair. I haven't seen it yet, because I gave it to my son and he has it. It was delivered to his farm down on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I'll go see it sometime this summer, probably. Right now, I mean, if my health holds up, and that's both my physical health and my [mental health], you know, I keep my marbles, I think at least I'd like to celebrate my fiftieth anniversary here. I don't know. That's kind of a goal at the present.

SI: That is good. Let me just hit pause for a moment.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Ready?

MR: Sure.

DR: You have done a lot of work on New Jersey. You say you have been writing for *New Jersey Monthly* since 1975.

MR: Well, actually, ... the first piece appeared in '77.

DR: 1977, okay.

MR: Yes. Magazine started in ... late '76, yes.

DR: Also, there are your urban adventures in exploring the state. How did you become interested, initially, in going on these adventures and are there any notable ones that stick out?

MR: Yes. I remember, when I first started to write about New Jersey, people would say, "But, you weren't born here, so, what do you know?" I thought about that a little while and I thought, "That's why I know, because I wasn't born here." In other words, I can see it from a fresh

perspective. I'm not sure I still can, by the way. I've written so much about New Jersey, for so long, that I don't know that I have anything further to say about it, [laughter] but I've probably written something like fifty magazine stories about New Jersey, most of which appeared in *New Jersey Monthly* over the years. ... Well, actually, the first story I wrote appeared in *Philadelphia Magazine*, and then, I approached *New Jersey Monthly*, which had just started. It was then in Princeton, ... practically a block from my house, and I went up there and showed them the one that had appeared in *Philadelphia*. ... I said I had this notion of biking Route 1 and they said, "Well, why don't you do that?" and so, it sort of grew, but in two spheres, magazine stories, and they weren't all just adventure stories. They were different kinds of stories. The most prominent ones, I think, the ones I came to be known by, more than any others, were the adventure stories, and I think I really was a kind of pioneer in urban adventure. Now, people canoe around Manhattan Island all the time. There's an annual swimming race, thirty miles around Manhattan Island, now as well. People run up the Empire State Building. ... I don't know that I should claim credit for it or whether it was something that was just going to happen whether I had something to say about it or not, but I was introduced, when I gave a talk somewhere, as the guy who pioneered urban adventure. I don't know if I did or I didn't, but I also wrote a lot of other stuff. For example, I did a story on Paterson, New Jersey, which won a prize for *New Jersey Monthly*; it won a prize, an annual journalism prize, "Best ... Feature of the Year." I did a story on a homeless guy in Morristown, New Jersey, who became very famous, became world-famous, a guy named Richard Kreimer, maybe a name that you remember. Richard was arrested ... because of some of his activities in the library, and then, he brought lawsuits, and it went on and on and went to Federal courts and became a cause célèbre. [Editor's Note: Beginning in the early 1990s with a lawsuit against the Town of Morristown, Richard Kreimer has engaged in a number of high-profile anti-homeless discrimination lawsuits against institutions and individuals in the New York-New Jersey area.] I went over to Hungary, I was lecturing in Budapest, Hungary, and somebody said, "Where are you from?" I said, "New Jersey." They said, "What town?" I said, "Morristown." [Dr. Rockland imitates a Hungarian accent] "Oh, Morristown, that's where they got that poor homeless man who's being persecuted by you people." [laughter] Anyway, so, I wrote a lot of different things, short pieces, long pieces, and then, by the way, one of the things that aided this, because of the magazine stories, [was that] *New Jersey Nightly News* contacted me and wanted me to be ... the cultural commentator on *New Jersey Nightly News*. So, for several years, I would do TV stories on New Jersey, go out with a crew, shooting; went down to the Woodstown Rodeo. [laughter] You know, we have this fantastic rodeo in South Jersey, incredible, you know. I went to Newark with a crew and went jogging with Ken Gibson, when he was then the Mayor of Newark [from 1970 to 1986], just he and I jogging together with a truck in front of us, with the guys shooting out the back of the truck, and we're both miked and we're just jogging in one of the parks in Newark. ... So, for three years, I did a lot of TV stuff about New Jersey, also. I'd forgotten about that, and then, of course, my movie, *Three Days on Big City Waters*, was two wacky professors from Rutgers who canoe across New Jersey then to get to Manhattan. ... I don't know, it just kind of pyramided. I began to teach the course "Jerseyana" and that, you know, so, I had to learn a lot about New Jersey. I wrote for *The New Jersey Encyclopedia* when Rutgers University Press came out [with that in 2004]. I wrote the long piece on New Jersey's image. I wrote about such things. For example, I wrote a cover story. They put Gilda Radner, from the old *Saturday Night Live*, on the cover of the magazine, with her as Roseanne Roseannadanna, in which she says, "New Jersey, it makes me want to die."

I did a whole piece on the Jersey joke, the origins of the Jersey joke, which really goes back to Colonial days. I wrote stories on the New Jersey-New York border and the fight that has gone on forever, and it's still going on, in some ways, between New York and New Jersey, as to where the border is exactly. ... So, it just kind of pyramided, and then, writing the book with Angus on the Turnpike, and the George Washington Bridge book is half about, maybe even more than half about, New Jersey, about our side of the bridge. ... The guy who built it lived in Boonton for forty years. He was a Swiss-German immigrant. So, it's been a good run. ... Angus, by the way, ... has also written a great deal about New Jersey, and he puts on the New Jersey Folk Festival every last Saturday in April, in fact, April 24th this year, and I've always been there to help him do it. It's his show, and he does it with our students. We get about fifteen thousand people coming to this thing. Of course, now, ... we have this whole new thing called Rutgers Day, and so, that's part of Rutgers Day, but it used to be alone, and then, it joined at the same day with Cook Field Day, ... but, now, it's a lot more. So, I've always been [a New Jersey scholar]. One of the things I like about New Jersey is that it's small enough that it's graspable. You can go anywhere in New Jersey. ... Another thing I've done a lot of, concerning New Jersey, is that I've lectured regularly over the years for the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. ... For example, this next Wednesday, I'm going to go give one talk in Lakewood and another one ... in West Windsor, same day. That doesn't normally happen, and then, when I wrote the book, ... this was one where Rutgers came to me and said, "We'd like you to write *The Jews of New Jersey: A Pictorial History*, because we've done one on the Italians and we want to do one on the Irish." ... I said, "I'd be willing to do it if my wife could do it with me, my *shiksa* wife," [laughter] ... if you know that word, "could do it with me," and they said, "Okay." So, we did it together. ... I think, when it comes to New Jersey itself, it's not anything I'll be writing about much, that I anticipate much, in the future. In fact, I keep thinking, "Gee, what do I want to propose ... to *New Jersey Monthly*?" I just don't seem to have much. I have ideas, but they don't turn me on a whole lot, and I think it has something to do with the fact that I think I've said ... pretty well everything I want to say about New Jersey, and I really [have branched out], well, let's face it, doing a book on Spain, and then, the next one on Japan fifty years ago, and the novel that I anticipate after that. So, I wouldn't say I'm burned out on New Jersey. I don't feel burned out about it; I just feel it's time for other people to have their say about New Jersey.

SI: How has teaching about New Jersey and writing about New Jersey been received here at the State University?

MR: That's a very good question. Rutgers has always had a problem, I think, with whether it's the State University or it isn't the State University. After all, Rutgers was a private college and university. It depends on whether you want to use the date '45 or '56, because it partly became it in '45. We already, by then, of course, had the [College of] Agriculture, we had the land-grant status and we had Douglass College. ... So, we had these two parts of Rutgers which were part of the state at a private place, at a private university. Rutgers', I think, main problem has always been, "What are we? Are we going to be Princeton or are we going to be Michigan?" and given that those state universities in the Midwest began as land-grant institutions, for the most part, they didn't have this conflict. We're rather unique in that respect, I think, being a state university which is just about the newest; I think it is. If I'm not mistaken about this, by the time we became fully the State University, in 1956, we were the last state in the United States to have a

state university. That was insane. Hawaii and Alaska had already come in as states, I think. ... Had they not come in yet?

SI: They came in in 1959.

MR: Then, I'm wrong. I'm sorry, but they came in and they had universities, yes. I believe Hawaii already had a university, and Alaska did, and, now, they were the state university of those states, I believe; '59, towards the very end of [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower['s term] then.

SI: They just had their fiftieth anniversary last year.

MR: Oh, okay, I'm sorry, yes. Okay, both of them, then, came in in '59. Okay, so, but, I think, given all the other states, we may have been the last of the forty-eight to have a state university. ... I'll never forget this; when Angus and I came up with the notion of--it was his idea at first, certainly his idea--to do a book on the New Jersey Turnpike, people thought we were crazy. Somebody in our department said, "Oh, you guys are ridiculous. Why would anyone write a book about the New Jersey Turnpike?" Ironically, of all my books, it's the one that has continued to be an evergreen, continues to sell. People still want to read it. It's still being offered in various courses, ... on regionalism and that sort of thing. Let's face it, New Jersey has always had something of an inferiority complex. I think, in recent years, that has improved greatly. Why? because I think we've gone through something of a renaissance. I mean, we produced Bruce Springsteen. Suddenly, the whole world says, "Whoa, the best rocker in the world comes from New Jersey." Of course, a whole lot of other people came from New Jersey, including Thomas Edison, Frank Sinatra, and we'd go on with the list, you know. ... America's two greatest actors, male, I think, Jack Nicholson, female, Meryl Streep, and Meryl, of course, I know because of the movie made in my house ... in which she starred, both come from New Jersey, you know. [Editor's Note: The 1998 film *One True Thing* was filmed in Professor Rockland's Morristown home.] ... So, we see the state [portrayed negatively]. New York has always put us down and there's always been a certain snobbery, I think, towards New Jersey among Rutgers people. ... I'll never forget this, ... I may have reported this earlier to you, sitting around at a dinner with a bunch of super-duper professors from the English Department. ... They were talking about "the State University" and they kept mentioning Camden. I said, "Wait a minute, are you actually saying that you think that Camden is the State University?" "Isn't it?" and I was thinking, "There's something seriously the matter here. These are all people, where do they live? New York City. Where would they rather be? at Columbia or NYU."

SI: Were they professors at Rutgers?

MR: Yes, at Rutgers, oh, yes. They didn't even know where the State capitol was.

SI: Wow.

MR: Their attitude towards New Jersey was, "Well, I got a job here." I've known professors at Rutgers who, if the state; of course, now, the academic marketplace is so much less open than it

was. The jobs are nowhere, and so, maybe Rutgers professors think of themselves as staying here [today], but, in earlier years, people, so many people, who lived in New York were just absolutely on the make and they had absolutely no dedication to this university whatsoever, and I would find these people disgusting. I mean, really, it pissed me off. We're being paid by this university. This is a great place and this is a great job, and you damn well ought to care. ... I mean, for some of them, if the University fell into the Raritan River tomorrow or somebody dropped an atomic bomb on it, they could care less, as long as they had a job somewhere else. As I say, I think this has lessened somewhat, but there were a lot of people like that, and I'm not like that. I'm a Jersey maven and I'm a transplant, and I've written so much about New Jersey that I like New Jersey. ... That's another thing about [New Jersey], being as small as it is, as I started to say before, I can get anywhere I want to get, you know, in a very short time, and I like to drive. I like to drive around the state. I like to meet people. I like to go to [speaking engagements]. ... Next Wednesday, as an example, I'm speaking in ... some sort of senior citizens' place in Lakewood, and then, coming back up north and speaking in a Jewish temple in West Windsor, and I like to do that. I like to travel around and, as a writer, I like to [discuss my works], and I always take along copies of my books when I go on these speaking trips. New Jersey Council for the Humanities pays me, not a hell of a lot of money, but it's fun. They pay your mileage and they pay you 250 bucks, ... but the fun, for me, is if people buy my books. I sell them at cost, because I really want the readers. I don't care about the money. I'd love to make some money, but I always say, "Hey, it's a bargain. I'm going to sell it at cost." ... It's a nice way to guarantee having readers and, you know, somebody reads your book and somebody else reads your book, and who do you write for if not your readers, yourself and your readers?

SI: It seems like you may have an interesting perspective, because what you are doing now with the New Jersey Council for the Humanities strikes me as being similar to what you did in Spain as a diplomat. Then, you were trying to bring America to the Spanish; now, you are bringing Rutgers to New Jersey-ians. What are your impressions of that?

MR: Yes, I think that's exactly right. I think that's exactly right.

SI: How do they view the University?

MR: Well, I think part of the reason I get invited is because I'm at the University. That is, ... people hear about me and/or they invite me back. ... The New Jersey Council will give institutions a grant, if they apply. I think they have to pay seventy-five dollars and, if they pay seventy-five dollars, they can have three speakers, and, sometimes, I've been all three speakers, or, sometimes, one. ... One of the reasons they invite me, I think, because the invitation comes from these places, and then, they have a grant, and then, they check it with the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and they say, "Yes, sure," ... often, in the question period, they want to talk about Rutgers. In the question/commentary period, we talk about Rutgers often, and there's always people ... who come up to you, say, "Yes, my granddaughter is going to Rutgers right now and I'd love for her ... to meet you." I say, "Well, tell her to come by my office, have a cup of coffee or tea with me sometime. I'd be happy to meet her," and so, I'm really out there a lot as a kind of an ambassador from the University, giving these talks here and there. I enjoy doing it, and, you know, that's another thing, these people, normally, when these people come to

these talks, man, they are the best. ... They are so much more interested than the students are in what I'm doing, what I'm talking about. They're just hanging off their seat. ... Sometimes, I can hardly get a word in edgewise, ... which is great. They just want to jump in and they want to debate and they want to talk about things. I mean, we do have good students, but I think one of the things that's made our students less interesting, to me, is the damn cell phone. I mean, the cell phone has really affected the behavior of our students. There's nothing the matter with technology, as long as you use it moderately, but they're obsessed with their cell phones. Their lives are conducted on their cell phones and you can just feel it as you're coming to the end of a class. Everybody's checking the time like crazy ... and the moment that class ends, boom, ... lights go on in the whole room. Everybody's flipped on their cell phone and you can see 160 kids walking out the door, in some big classes I sometimes give, and they're on the phone with somebody. ... That's very different and I think most unfortunate. I used to be [approached by students after class], and I don't think that I've diminished as a teacher and that's why they're not talking to me. ... In fact, I've won five major teaching awards, and mostly in recent years. So, I don't care, [but] it used to be, you know, you'd teach a class, and six or seven kids ... who didn't have a class afterwards would be gathered around you and you'd say, "Hey, come on in my office, right across the hall. We'll hang out and talk some more," or, "It's a nice day, let's go out and sit under a tree;" doesn't happen very often anymore. It's their loss, but it's my loss, too, a little bit. ... There's still a few good students who really care and who, you know, I get close to, ... but they are less, they are simply less. ... It's just the most amazing thing to watch. Sometimes, I teach in Ruth Adams 001. It's a huge lecture hall, seats 160, and, often, I'll be teaching "Jerseyana," sometimes, in that classroom, and this is a class about ... which the students are often passionate. That class is really crazy, because it's almost like a class full of cheerleaders or something. They all come into this class, ... there's a few out-of-state people in it, but most of the people are taking that class because they love New Jersey. [laughter] That's why they're in the class, but, when the class ends, each time, even in that class, though less so, they've flipped on their cell phones and they walk out the door. ... I watch them, sometimes, walk across the campus and I think, "Poor bastards, ... if they don't want to talk to me, why don't they talk to each other?" Even if they want to say, "Rockland is a crock," or, "Rockland's awful. Rockland's terrible," whatever, but talk to each other. Why is it that they want to talk to somebody somewhere else? Why? and there's been a lot written about this lately, that people, that students, are simply not forming friendships in their classes anymore, that they used to form friendships. I used to have students who met each other in my class and got married to each other, and now have kids. ... I get a big kick out of that. There's been a lot written about how students don't form friendships in classes anymore. That's not where they form friendships, and you'll see a dozen students who walked out of that class and they're all on their cell phones, and they're obviously not talking to each other. ... I think, "That's really unfortunate. If they're talking to somebody, anybody, elsewhere, that's what they're into, that the further away, probably, the more prestige and status they feel." Look, I'm a little bit of a participant in that as well, not with cell phones, but with e-mail. ... Let's face it, look at how technology affects us; I mean, why am I writing e-mails to my own wife, who happens to be in the house, you know? [laughter] We get an e-mail, comes in from my daughter, I send her an e-mail, and I think, well, our daughter, "You think we should do this, Patricia? Kate wants us to do this. You think we should do this?" Why the hell [do we not just talk about it], you know? Well, she's in her study with the door closed, I'm in my study with the door closed and I send her an e-mail. [laughter]

It's a very interesting way of communicating, and, also, I do an awful lot of overseas communication and, probably, I get a bigger kick out of an overseas communication than a local communication. It feeds my ego. So, in a way, I'm not immune ... to a similar kind of thing. I think e-mail can get to be a kind of an addiction, I think. So, while I may not be addicted to cell phones, I own one, but I keep it in my briefcase. I keep it turned off at all times, never answer it, ... and I just will use it in an emergency or to call Patricia, tell her I'll be home an hour late or something like that. That's about all I ever use it for, you know, but I think there's a way in which, maybe, I look at my e-mail more than I need to or should, because maybe once a day is enough. How about once a week? [laughter] not three or four times a day, which is what I normally do, and what am I looking for? I'm looking for something that'll feed my ego, somebody wants me to come give a talk. ... For example, I'm going to, on May 8th, ... Georgia, Soviet Georgia, and, now, it's been arranged that, on the way back, I'm stopping in Istanbul and I'm going to lecture in Istanbul. That just happened in the last couple of weeks, that I was hoping would happen, and, you know, I get a big kick out of these communications from Georgia and Istanbul, what I'm going to do there. ... When you think of it, what's better about Istanbul and Georgia than South Jersey? [laughter] nothing, except, "Wow, they want me to speak in Istanbul." Well, actually, I've never been in Istanbul. ... They say it's a fascinating place and I'm really keen, really, I'm very excited about that part of the trip. ... I'm checking my e-mail, wondering, "Anything new from Istanbul?" you know. [laughter]

DR: With all this new technology, have you seen a change in your students' work over the years? In the past fifteen, maybe twenty years now, there has been a lot more access to information. Have students gotten lazier with their work? Has it been similar throughout, where you will always have lazy students and hardworking students? Has the Internet changed anything that you have noticed?

MR: Well, the first thing that came to mind was students sending me e-mails that simply aren't written in decent English, and I'm thinking, "What the hell's the matter with these people? They're asking me, their professor, who, fortunately or not, [laughter] has a certain power over them called a grade. Don't they want to impress me? Do they really want to write me a message that is full of ... misspelling and one grammatical error after another, and all sorts of abbreviations, the word 'To,' the number '2,' and stuff like that? Do they really know about T-O, T-W-O and T-O-O? Do they even know about this?" [laughter] You know, so, ... some of the students probably think I'm just a hard ass, but I've taken to, if I get an e-mail message from a student and it isn't written in proper English, I send it right back. I say, "I'll answer your letter when you send it to me in English." I feel I have a responsibility to do that. I don't think I have any ego involved in this. I think I'm saying to them, "Hey, listen, I want you to be successful when you graduate from here, and you're not going to be successful, because you're going to have a boss who is going to fire you when you give your boss a communication like that. So, I'm telling you right now, you'd better shape up." So, that's part of it. There are students in class all the time who have laptops. How do I know what they're doing on those laptops? I don't know. ... They may be the best students, who are actually taking notes and [are] really very serious about this whole thing, or, for all I know, they're e-mailing their buddies, and then, there's ... the IM, the instant messaging thing on cell phones. If I've got a class of 160 kids, okay, should I be walking around? Do I really have to be walking around, seeing whether they're using their

thumbs here under the seat and I can't see it because of somebody sitting in front of them? Do I really have to do that? I certainly have played with the idea of saying, "Tell you what, guys, I'm going to always have a basket in the classroom and, when you come in, you put your cell phone in there and, when you leave, you take your cell phone." I've played with that idea. People have told me, "You can't do it. It's illegal. You can't take away somebody's property. You don't have any right to do that, and they're going to hate you." [laughter] ... But I play with the idea. I have said, certainly, when I'm giving an exam, ... because how the hell do I know that somebody isn't giving somebody else an answer who's sitting ... eight rows back? I've said, "Any cell phone that appears during this exam will be confiscated and I will give it back to you in a few days, but I will hold on to it for several days." So, you know, it's like any other technology. An automobile is a wonderful thing, but not when you kill a pedestrian. ... [laughter] Any technology can advance human beings, but it can also deteriorate human communication and exchange. Every single means that we've found for travel, modern travel, with the automobile, the airplane, the jet plane, allows us to live further apart and still communicate. One of my sons lives in Tucson, Arizona. He's the kid who was in *Doctor Zhivago* [(1965)]. Jeffrey has four little children, four little grandchildren of mine, and would he be living in Tucson, Arizona, if we didn't have [modern communications]? I mean, he's practically, of my three older kids, probably the one I communicate with the most, and we're very close. ... If you have the automobile and if you have the buses and if you have the trains and if you have the jet planes, then, people can live further apart. That has its advantages, because it means people can go anywhere, but it has its disadvantages also. In the old days, Colonial days, if you were going to go West and the rest of your family wasn't going West, well, you were saying good-bye to your family forever. So, that gave you pause as to whether to go West or not. I'm just saying that every technological advance [has its drawbacks], and, yes, here are wonderful things you can do on computers, no question about it. Sometimes, I want a simple fact, like, for example, the error I made before about when Alaska and Hawaii came in. ... You don't have to go to the library, go through a hundred books, trying to find out. You could just, you know, Google, put down, "Alaska, date it came into the Union," whatever, boom, comes right up. That's a nice thing to be able to do that. So, I guess I'm saying we should always use technology in moderation. We should use it for useful purposes and we shouldn't use it for purposes which are deleterious, and there are a lot of purposes that are, I think, deleterious.

SI: Can we talk a little bit about the history of American Studies as a department?

MR: Sure.

SI: You have already described how it developed out of the period when you were a dean, and then, you became a professor.

MR: I did, right, right. Yes, that was kind of fun. We always were very small. We're much larger now, which is peculiar, because most of the humanities have shrunk. I mean, the History Department is a little bit smaller, the English Department is smaller. We're one of the few departments, certainly in the humanities, that has grown. We now have about eight faculty members. For years and years and years, we had, like, three-and-a-half. We were originally a program; that is, ... that we didn't have the status. We weren't called a department, we were

called a program, even though our positions were fully in American Studies. Usually, when there's a program, your positions aren't in the program, they're in History or English, or something, and you contribute part of your time to the program. ... Somebody will be chair for a few years, then, somebody else will be chair, and, when they're chair, maybe they're running a program, American Studies or any other program. They might teach one less course, or something like that. Well, we were a program and ... we were small. ... Then, when the first reorganization came along, it happened during the '81, '82 years, I remember, though, it was being prepared for in the previous years, and I was very opposed to it. [Editor's Note: In the late 1970s, efforts began to reorganize the New Brunswick faculty into a unified Faculty of Arts and Sciences, which was accomplished in 1981.] I thought, "That's crazy." ... I thought the Federated Plan, and I think I've spoken about this before, the Federated Plan was a wonderful plan and I think we made a big mistake, and wouldn't be surprised if, over the years, we gravitate back to where we were before. I mean, right now, they're having a search for the Douglass Dean. The Douglass Dean to do what? What is there to do as a Douglass Dean? There are no faculty and no students, so, what the hell do you do as a Douglass Dean? So, you're the "campus dean." I'm not sure what the hell a campus dean is, exactly. So, we were a program, and, in '81-'82, they decided that they were going to consolidate departments. Up until then, you had a history department on each campus, a Livingston History Department, a Rutgers and a University College, a Douglass. I don't know if you had a Cook. ... Now, you were putting them all in Van Dyck [Hall, current home of the New Brunswick History Department], say, and, during that time, we became a department, something I fought very hard for. It was interesting how it happened. They said, "We're not going to have programs, now. We're going to have departments. So, here's what we're going to do. We're going to take American Studies and we're going to get Chinese Studies and Chicano Studies, and every other [kind of study], and Women's Studies, and all these studies and we're going to put them together into one big department," and I said, "Nuts to that." I mean, especially, what would we be doing ... with Chinese and Slavic Studies? ... All the little programs like that, they wanted to shove together in one department, and some of them had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with each other, and I basically said, "Over my dead body, they ain't going to do that." So, we became a department, then, which was kind of neat. We didn't have that name, now we had that name. We've had it ever since, and one of the strange things was that I was chair for so long. I was the senior chair of Rutgers University by decades. [laughter] I mean, normally, you're elected chair for three years, and, normally, maybe, you do another three. You're chair for, maybe, six years, and then, somebody else does it, which is a very nice thing about academia, that it's not hierarchical, that you'll move into an administrative position temporarily, at least on the departmental level, and that you switch places. People keep switching places and, now, you have a new person running the department, but they have somebody they can talk to who used to run the department, but our department was so small. We had three-and-a-half people and, every three years, I'd be reelected chair. So, I was chair for over thirty years, [laughter] and then, finally, got out of it, ... but that's something that's noteworthy, that for so long, people, I think, when they thought of American Studies, they thought of me. ... You know, sometimes, I think, when we were small, we got a hell of a lot more done than now that we're larger.

SI: How so?

MR: Well, you get larger, you get more bureaucratic. A faculty meeting, back when I was chair, was me opening my door and shouting out the door to everybody else whose door was open, "Hey, guys, what do you say we do such-and-such?" "Great idea, Michael, do it." That was a faculty meeting. I mean, we did, occasionally, have a real meeting, but we were, like, you know, light. We weren't carrying around a whole lot of weight. For example, I was just about the only chair of Rutgers University who taught the same as everybody else, the same load, which, when I first came here, was three courses a semester. When I saw History and English and all of them going to two, I said, "Well, we'll go to two, also. The hell with it." So, we went to two and, for a long, long time, I taught the same as everybody else, and I also didn't ask for any extra compensation, because ... I didn't think a chair should get more money than anyone else. It was an honor to be a chair; that's the way I saw it. Well, it's a hell of a lot easier to be a chair of three-and-a-half people than to be chair of fifty people, [laughter] ... but, for many years, I had the same teaching load and I didn't ask for any extra compensation, even though there were departments no larger than mine ... where the chair was getting extra compensation and teaching less classes. I thought, "This is ridiculous. I could do this chair thing with my left pinky," partly because of my government experience. When you've had seven years in the Foreign Service and a year in state government, you could spot bullshit a mile off. [laughter] You know what you have to do and what you don't have to do. ... You could receive twelve things in one day ... and you could throw out eleven of them immediately, because they're just baloney, and just do the twelfth. A new person in the job, takes them years before they discover that. [laughter] So, I would do chair, Angus Gillespie would do the Folk Festival, Leslie Fishbein would put out our magazine--we put out a magazine called *The Salad Bowl*, a very good magazine--and I would, as part of being chair, also be advisor to our student-faculty club. We had a club. It was very active. Now, here we are, all these years later, the magazine has folded and, now, the club has folded, and I'm thinking, "What the hell's the matter with us? We've got eight people instead of three people and we seem capable of doing much less than we used to be able to do," and that saddens me a little bit and it makes me wonder. Well, let's face it, I'm a student of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. One of the main things that de Tocqueville was saying, and it's still the most important book that's ever been written about the United States, and you read this book, which came out in two volumes, in 1835 and 1840, Volume I, Volume II. ... The guy was an absolute genius. He came over here for nine months [from France] to write a book about the penitentiary system of the United States, which he did do, but took some notes, went back and wrote this unbelievable [book]. The guy was absolutely a prophet, and the thing about Tocqueville that I find most engaging is the notion of small units, the notion of decentralization. It's one of the reasons why ... I was opposed to the consolidation of departments and why I was opposed to the creation of the School of Arts and Sciences, where all students would no longer be in colleges but would be in one mass. We, in effect, have become Minnesota or Wisconsin, Penn State. That's what we've done. So, it isn't as if what we've done is different than most state universities. I just thought we were better than other state universities and the system that we had was simply better, in that nobody got lost in the shuffle and ... everybody felt they belonged somewhere, that students didn't feel, you know, that there was nobody they could talk to. Our department, I think, even though it's gotten bigger, still remains, I think, a fairly intimate place. ... I think our students like to be American Studies majors, in part, because they feel like we care about them. They're not lost in some huge department with nobody to talk to. I remember the way it was in grad school for me at the University of Minnesota. There was a professor, Mary

Turpie, and Mary never married ... and didn't have a family, and she was so devoted to us graduate students. She was our mother. When, many years later, I received, from the National American Studies Association, the national prize for teaching, named for Mary Turpie, [the Mary C. Turpie Prize for Outstanding Teaching], I was just ... in tears. I mean, she was my academic mother. [laughter] She was my graduate school mother. ... I didn't know what the hell I was doing when I got to graduate school. She just held my hand and saw me through it, and then, I grew up and I wrote a doctoral dissertation, eventually. ... She was so wonderful and I'll never forget it, because she was so devoted to us. ... Whenever I feel like closing my door and writing one of my books, I remember Mary and ... how open she was, and so, one of the great struggles I have, and that any professor has, is the struggle between your devotion to your students and your own work, ... whatever book you're writing, and you should have that struggle, I mean. ... One of the things that I find most unfortunate is that some of the most "distinguished" people around Rutgers are the ones who care the least about their students, and they're celebrated. Who are they celebrated by? not by the students, not by the students' parents, not by the legislators, not by the citizens of New Jersey. Who are they celebrated by? They're celebrated by other faculty. Some of these people are lousy teachers. I don't even know if they should be here, or maybe they should be doing full-time research. Nothing says that if you're a good researcher that you're also a good teacher. The model, ... what we all hope for, is that you can do both of those ... two things well, but there are some people, when they give somebody tenure, ... I mean, we give a lot of lip service to teaching, but, frankly, there are people who are given tenure in the University who couldn't teach their way out of a paper bag. Those people shouldn't even be teaching kindergarten. They can't teach, but they've written ... arcane books that ... no one reads and, therefore, they've been promoted. Now, they're full professors, or whatever, and I don't think anybody should stay at a university who can't teach, unless they're going to be given a full-time sinecure in research, and that would work, maybe, better in the sciences, let's say, than in the humanities and the social sciences. We should be able to do ... both of those things, equally well. ... I hear from students all the time about such-and-such a professor who is world-famous, but doesn't show up for class. I mean, there are people around here who really should get fired, and I won't mention names, but there's a guy I know who really ... doesn't belong here. This guy is on the road all the time. ... I don't miss classes. I just don't miss them. ... Next Wednesday, I don't teach, so, I'm going to go give these two talks. When I go to Georgia and Istanbul, Turkey, it's after classes end and after my last final, and before summer school. So, I always, when I get invited places, ... say, "Well, yes, I can come winter break or I can come spring break, or I can come whatever." I lectured in England during spring break a few weeks ago, but otherwise I feel like I belong here, or, if I have to be absent one day, I've got to get a colleague to take my class, as I do for them as well, but there are people who just don't show up for class. They just don't show up. Sometimes, they haven't even alerted the students. What about the poor students who are making their way to that classroom and only then find out that this person isn't coming? What about the commuters who are driving fifty miles to get here, risking their lives, and arrive and this person isn't here? I think that's outrageous. See, the great thing about being a professor is you're given immense freedom. ... I don't think because you're ... given great freedom that you should take advantage of that freedom. You're given that freedom so that you can think for yourself and do research or write, or whatever, for yourself, and nobody's going to criticize you, or at least they're not going to fire you for your views, although, sometimes, they do, especially if you don't have tenure. You know, that's one of the ironies of the whole thing. The people who

don't have tenure, they're really the brave ones. [laughter] Some guy got fired, I was reading in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, ... the other day for saying that when you're an adjunct professor, you are, and then, he used the "N" word, of academia. Well, that's true, [laughter] and he got fired because he used the "N" word, but he was using it within a certain context, okay. I think that's absolutely true ... and as academia has been funded less well over the years--and look at the immense cuts we're taking here at Rutgers--what do we do? We hire more and more adjuncts, and we pay them nothing. You could just see where, from the University's point of view, if a guy like me would disappear, it would cost them a bunch of money for a year or so, but, after that, they could hire twenty adjuncts, [laughter] ... poor, starving graduate students, or whatever, pay them ... thirty-five hundred dollars a course. More and more, our students are being taught by these adjuncts. The assumption is that people like me are better than them. I'm not sure that we are. Sometimes, the adjuncts are wonderful. Sometimes, they're bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and they come from their graduate school classes and got a whole lot to say. Sometimes, I think there's something terribly unjust about how poorly we pay adjuncts when they're doing exactly what I do. There's something wrong with this picture, and we have more and more of them because they're cheaper. They're so cheap. You can say, "Well, they don't have to serve on committees and they don't have to come to faculty meetings," yes, but that doesn't take a hell of a lot of your time, unless you're somebody's who devoted to that kind of thing. Somebody in my department's devoted to that kind of thing. ... She never saw a committee she didn't want to serve on, but she never writes anything and her teaching is ... not exciting. So, she serves on committees all the time. She does do a lot of good for the University, I think, precisely because she serves on all these committees and things, but that's not really what she's mainly supposed to be doing.

SI: Can we ask you some questions about that period between when American Studies began and when it became a department, during or after the reorganization? One thing that stands out about that pre-reorganization period, from interviewing other professors, is all the levels of bureaucracy they had to deal with, like, sections and super chairs, stuff like that.

MR: Yes.

SI: Were you free from all that, or were there other things to deal with?

MR: We were uniquely free, and the reason why we were was because American Studies was only on one campus. It was only on the Douglass Campus. It didn't [have other branches], so, we didn't have to consolidate. We didn't do anything. We just went from Hickman Hall to Ruth Adams Hall. That's all we did. We were exactly the same in a different building. ... So, we weren't affected by that at all.

SI: Did you just deal directly with the dean, or the dean's office?

MR: Yes ... but, now ... the dean I was concerned with was the head of FAS, then, later, SAS. ... Back when the colleges were key, your boss was the college dean. If you were the chair of a ... department or program on our campus, the person you reported to was the Douglass Dean. She had hired [you]. She hired and fired, she promoted; well, it was a much more complicated

process, but she had a big say in promotions and stuff. So, we didn't change a whole lot, except that, suddenly, the place we worried about was not College Hall at Douglass, but 77 Hamilton Avenue [the Executive Dean's Office], and it's been that ever since. ... When we went from FAS to SAS, that didn't change things for us. It changed things for the students. ... Although we were on the Douglass Campus, only on the Douglass Campus, about half of our majors were male. They came from other campuses. So, it wasn't just that we were all female, in terms of our students. So, that worked out all right.

SI: Again, before the reorganization, how did American Studies fare under Foster, and then, [Dean of Douglass College Jewel Plummer] Cobb? How did they treat American Studies?

MR: Well, the fact that I had been a dean didn't hurt. Margery was a little disappointed with me when I quit being a dean, but she was very nice about it. I mean, what happened to me is, I sort of looked around and I thought, "I'm slaving away here." ... You know, if you have the title, "Dean," people think you're hot stuff, that you're some kind of big cheese. [laughter] You're not. [laughter] Most deans are just kind of slaves. They're the ones who do the work around here. They pay the light bills. ... They're the clerks. I don't mean to insult deans, I was a dean, but I looked around, I said, "What's going on here? I've got this title, dean," and that's funny, too, because, as I think I may have mentioned, I had never been on campus before except as a student. I went from student to dean without ever passing, "Go," you know. [laughter] So, because I'd been a dean and knew Margery well, she was always very kind to me, and, in the case of Jewel Cobb, I was actually on the selection committee for the dean. ... I think, you know, ... when deans are used to dealing with faculty members, some of whom are very eccentric, that a guy like me, who was rather normal, is kind of a pleasure for a dean. I mean, there are some crazy people around here. Some of them are geniuses and some of them are just crazy. There's a guy in our building who I learned [was a genius] when *Time Magazine*, at the millennium, came out with a series of issues, special issues, and one was on the sciences, and listed the hundred greatest scientists of the twentieth century. I thought, "Holy mackerel, there's this guy upstairs in my building who's one of those guys," [laughter] because I know that same guy as a guy who goes outside and goes looking in the dumpsters. I know that guy as a guy who, every once in awhile, walks out of his office stark naked. ... The poor secretaries have to steer him back into his office and say, "Professor So-and-So, please put your clothes on before you come out again," [laughter] and this guy is apparently a genius. So, deans have to deal with those kinds of people, and they find them [trying]. So, I'm not saying all the rest of the faculty members are crazy, but, ... yes, there's a fair amount of eccentricity on campus, and I'm just sort of a regular guy, you know. I'm very normal [laughter] and, I mean, my life is very balanced. Some faculty haven't gotten exercise their entire lives. I go to the gym four days a week. ... It's just as important to me to be in shape physically as it is to be in shape mentally and intellectually. In fact, I see the three things as working together. I'm not a *prima donna*. Some faculty are, and I've been blessed with very good health. I say I never miss classes. In forty-one years at Rutgers, I have only missed class one day for health reasons. Now, that's really extraordinary, and it wasn't even [due to illness]. If I got a cold, I'd come to class anyway. I mean, if I had the flu, I'm going to come anyway. I'm just not going to cancel class. I'll just stay away from my students, so [that] I don't give them the cold, but I just believe I have such a privileged job that I shouldn't take advantage of it. One time, [while] I was living in Princeton, I

was playing a guy who also lives in Princeton and who taught in our Poli. Sci. Department. We used to go play down to the Dillon Gym [at Princeton University], I think it was called. We ... played squash, and, one morning, he hit me in the face with his racket sideways, split my whole face open, and took me to the hospital. ... I was all sewed up and I looked like a Ubangi. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Africans who engage in the body modification practice of wearing large lip plates are frequently but erroneously referred to as Ubangis, based on a Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus exhibit that toured the world in the early twentieth century.] My lips were out about a foot in front of my face, and I just couldn't say a word. I couldn't talk, and so, I didn't go to class that day. I had called; I had somebody call in and say I simply could not come. That, I recall, is the only day in forty-one years I've ever missed a class for health reasons. That's pretty damn lucky, I mean, that I also have very good health, I think, but, also, when I'm sick, I'm going to go to class anyway. ... For a lot of other people, you know, they're a little bit sick, they don't show up for class. I think that's ridiculous, or they're not sick at all or they'd rather do something else, and some of those people are the most celebrated people around here and I think there's something wrong about that. ... Somebody ought to kick their butts and tell them, "Look, you can be celebrated, but you damn well owe us the minimum of what we expect from a professor, and, if you don't, you're out of here." I mean, let's face it, Rutgers is very much like the New York Yankees [Major League Baseball team]. They've got a lot of money--we don't have a lot of money, but they have a lot of money--and they buy all the good ballplayers. Rutgers, and every university, every major university, is like this; it wants stars for its faculty. It wants stars. Those stars may be evil people and they may be people who ignore their students and ignore their duties at Rutgers, but they put a feather in the cap of the University. I put feathers in the cap of the University, too, every time I write a book and go off to lecture in England on spring break, and this other trip ... that I'm going to do in May. That puts a feather in the cap of the University. People around the world know Rutgers because people like me go elsewhere, or at least it helps. They already know Rutgers, ... that's why they invited me, but, now, they know it better, say, but there are people ... Rutgers will simply lie down and die for to get here because they are famous, or notorious, for something. Are they necessarily great men and women? I'm not sure about that, and it seems to me that, to be a great man or be a great woman, you should be caring about some of the things I'm talking about, and many of them do not, do not. ... I mean, it's really funny. As I've said, I've won five major teaching awards. You would think, and I'm not complaining; I'm not. You know, some of them, I got from Rutgers. I got the [Warren I.] Sussman Award [for Excellence in Teaching], I also got the Scholar-Teacher Award, I also got the Professor of the Year Award and I got the FAS Award for Distinguished Contributions to whatever [Undergraduate Education], and then, I got this one national award, and I'm not complaining. I'm happy I got these awards. They gave me a plaque, I put it on the wall, [laughter] but, if we really cared that much about teaching, we would care about these things, and the irony is that we don't. We pretend to, and, again, this is not sour grapes. I am very [content]. I am a happy man. [laughter] I am happy with my job. I don't have any complaints. Somebody gave me the perfect job a long time ago and I have prospered and been very happy and had a job with almost no stress, which allows me to be as creative as ... I can be, but I'm also very critical of some of the values of universities, especially universities on the make. ... Once again, I think one of Rutgers' main problems is, it isn't sure it's the state university. [laughter] There's Princeton, just down the street, fifteen miles south of here, and Rutgers wants to be Princeton, and it shouldn't be wanting to be Princeton. It should be wanting

to be California and Michigan and Wisconsin and Minnesota, and that's what Rutgers should want to be and give up this [other goal], and, again, we're a strange animal because of all the years we were something else, that we were private. So, it isn't as easy as that, and there are reasons why we still are stuck in the past a little bit. I mean, I know people around here who think that having a good football team is a disgrace. Well, I think it's crazy that we pay our football coach four times as much as the President, who makes twice as much as the Governor. I mean, things are kind of out of whack around here. Maybe we ought to be paying some guy who's in his lab right now working on a cure for AIDS a hell of a lot more than we pay the football coach. ... There's something really crazy here, but the fact of the matter is that the football team, in recent years, it had perhaps more to do than anything with getting New Jersey-ians to care about their state university. Should it be that way? no. Is it that way? yes, it is that way. That block "R," which we see everywhere, has done more for this university than practically [anything else], you know, and it shouldn't be that way. It's wrong, but it is that way. People care. I remember when I went to the University of Minnesota. Every farmer on his tractor, on a Saturday, harvesting his soy beans, would have a little portable radio, listening to the football game, caring so much about "the U." We are in a difficult situation. We're a small state. We've got thirteen professional teams surrounding us in New York and Philadelphia, essentially none of our own, or only maybe one, the Nets [National Basketball Association team], but they're about to go elsewhere. The Devils [National Hockey League team], I don't know where they are at this point, and here we are, smack in the middle of the state here in New Brunswick, with our flagship campus, and people are caring about this university in a way I have never experienced in all my years here. Are they caring about the Nobel Prizes we won? no. Are they caring about the books I write and the teaching awards I've won, just to put it on a personal basis? no. They're caring about football. Should it be that way? no. I wrote a piece for *New Jersey [Monthly]* called "Leap Year," about the year when the football team went 11-2 and the ... women's basketball team, lost to Tennessee the last game in the NCAA. ... Man, that was the year [2006-2007] when people started to love this university in a way I've never experienced before. People have flags on their houses. I went to a party with my wife's family on Easter Sunday, this past Sunday, and this guy, he had a Rutgers flag hanging on his house. [laughter] I couldn't believe it, had a Rutgers flag hanging on his house, and he had "Rs" in his window. He happened to have gone to Rutgers. Why has he got the flag up and the "Rs?" He never used to do that. ... It's because of the football team, and so, like it or not, and whether it should be that way or not, people care about this university for the football team more than for anything else. They just do. It's ridiculous, but they do. ...

SI: After the reorganization, they had the Fellows Program. Did you become a fellow at Douglass College?

MR: Sure.

SI: Okay, what was involved in that? Does anything stand out from your involvement there?

MR: Well, much as I admired Eddie [Edward] Bloustein, and I think I told you, [when] he went to high school, my father was his teacher, the [Douglass] Fellows program was ridiculous. [Editor's Note: Dr. Edward J. Bloustein served as Rutgers University President from 1971 until

his death in 1989. The Douglass Fellows, formed in 1981, were voting members of the former Douglass faculty. ...They were supposed to make ... decisions involving Douglass-specific academic programs, requirements for general honors, graduation requirements, advising and student life, and curriculum for college mission-related courses.] It was absolutely absurd. It didn't work, for the simple reason that faculty are just like anybody else. Who's paying your salary? The Douglass Dean wasn't paying your salary anymore. The Douglass Dean wasn't hiring and firing you. So, you didn't give a damn about [Douglass], or a lot of people didn't, I should say. I did, people in American Studies did, partly because we were only on that campus, so, we always cared about Douglass. To this day, we're that way, but I lost my train of thought. [laughter]

SI: The Fellows Program.

MR: Yes, yes, it was a bullshit program. It was bullshit, because Eddie had once been to Oxford. They had fellows and they had ... all the various colleges; I think there were thirty-four colleges at Oxford. Each one's really a college and Oxford is really like a place you live and to have your social life. ... So, maybe the first year, people went to fellows meetings, the second year, less, less, less. Pretty soon, you'd have a fellows meeting, there wasn't anybody there. It just didn't work. Why? because the extent to which you remained an active fellow, and I did remain a fairly active fellow, [was based on personal concern alone]. I continued to go to the Douglass graduations. When we had the Federated Plan, you had a Douglass graduation and 199 out of the two hundred Douglass faculty were there. By the time they were getting ready to take the students out of the colleges all together, and this year will be the last year there is a Douglass, or they'll be college graduations; this year's the last one. Well, this year, I can't go. I'll be in Istanbul, but you began to see, you know, the numbers come down, down, down, down, down, and, pretty soon, it was embarrassing. You'd have these students graduating, seven hundred students graduating, and you'd have, maybe, five faculty members. ... The five faculty members would march in and you'd think, "This is a disgrace. It's an absolute disgrace, because these parents have come and these students have been here and nobody's going to it," or the other college graduations. ... As I think I said, FAS, now SAS, when there's a faculty meeting, I mean, we have fifteen hundred, I think, full-time faculty, I believe, and SAS, we have the biggest unit of the University, you go to an SAS faculty meeting, there might be thirty or forty people there. ... Apparently, reorganization helped build up the graduate program, but I think we paid a hell of a price, and I think we could have built it up without the whole reorganization. We could have kept the colleges. ... We cared deeply about Douglass College and one of the reasons I cared deeply about Douglass College, first of all, is I met my wife [there]. [laughter] My wife was once my student. This was before the days of sexual harassment, [laughter] and she was a student in my class, you know, thirty-four years ago. ... Our daughter went to Douglass, and four of my five kids went to Rutgers University, three, full-time, one, her last two years. So, I care about this place very much. This place has done so much for me and for those I love. ... My wife, every year, used to make a major contribution to the Douglass Alumnae. She'd say, you know, "You've been at Douglass forever, I graduated from Douglass, our daughter graduated from Douglass. I think we should give hundreds of dollars to Douglass, to the alumnae." Now, my wife refuses to give a dime, and I say, "Why?" She said, "Because there is no Douglass College. Why should I give? It's just wasted money," from her point of view. I don't think that's

entirely true, but that's the way she feels, and I'm sure a lot of other people feel that way also. I don't know what goes on in the Douglass Administration Building. I haven't a clue what goes on in the Douglass Alumnae Building. I don't know what the hell they do over there, really. All of those kinds of functions have been centralized.

SI: Looking at your twenty years as the Chair of American Studies ...

MR: Thirty.

SI: Thirty, sorry.

MR: Thirty-plus, I think, because it's forty-one that I've been here, now, and I stopped being chair maybe eight or nine years ago.

SI: What were the major challenges that you faced? Obviously, getting funding, trying to get more lines, would be one.

MR: Yes.

SI: Are there others that stand out, things that you fought for, things that were constant problems or things that you had to deal with?

MR: Well, there was that one I mentioned before, during the first reorganization, where they tried to shoehorn us into a department that made absolutely no sense whatsoever, and that was a big fight. I mean, ... as they say in *The Godfather*, "We went to the mattresses on this one." I mean, ... we just weren't going to let it happen, and Angus always, Angus Gillespie always, talks about how he never saw me quite in such a rage. It was partly a put-on rage. I mean, I knew what I was doing, apparently, in retrospect. ... At a meeting, I mean, I just didn't mince any words. I told these people who were trying to do this to us, "You people are crazy and it's going to happen over my dead body, so, you'd better just make up your mind." I mean, I just became so difficult, ... you know, that they just let us alone. In fact, that's when we became a department, ironically. [laughter] We got promoted from program to department right then, crazy thing. That was a bad time. That was a tough time.

SI: Were you fighting with Old Queens?

MR: No, we were fighting with this committee of faculty who had been placed in [charge], made responsible for the reorganization, under the Provost. Now, we don't have a provost in New Brunswick, but, then, we had a provost. It was under the Provost. ... In fact, the Provost was in this building. [laughter] That's right, this building. Every time I come to this building, I get the creeps a little bit, [laughter] "Oh, shit." Is this number 25, by the way?

SI: It is 18 Bishop Place.

MR: 18, 18 Bishop, oh, yes; 25 is the center just down there.

SI: The Global Center?

MR: Yes, the Center for Contemporary Culture [Center for Cultural Analysis, at 8 Bishop Place], yes. So, this building was a hated building for me, at some point. It's where I came to fight with these people who were trying to destroy us. There was another point where, as chair, and it really had a lot to do with me not wanting to be chair anymore, we were given the opportunity to hire a new person, that we'd fought for one for years and we finally could have one. ... So, I set up a committee, which ... consisted of all of our faculty and our student leaders, because, then, we had a nice club, and so, our president, our vice-president, our treasurer, secretary, whatever, of the club, they were on it, ... and then, some other students, our best students. We had this committee of about close to twenty people and we conducted a national search. I mean, I basically handled the national search, but, then, with the faculty, we winnowed it down to three people as the ones we would bring to campus to meet, and, after we brought the three people to campus to meet, nineteen out of the twenty people agreed on one person as, "That's the person that we want." One person wanted the person we got. We had a meeting with the dean, ... of FAS and ... the person who was then head of humanities, who was, you know, our most immediate dean. Neither one of them had met, when she came to campus, the person we wanted, who we thought was superb, but everybody thought so, except one person. I mean, nineteen out of twenty is pretty good, and they had met the person who was a distant third for us, a distant third, and they wanted her because of her pedigree, her Ivy League pedigree. I mean, to me, the whole Ivy League thing around here drives me out of my mind, the extent to which there's a [bias]. It's almost like racism, or some kind of other ugly prejudice, that, somehow, if somebody's coming from the Ivy League, they must be smarter than the rest of us. It's just not true, and they wanted this Ivy League person. It was much more complicated than that, but, basically, they said, "You can have that one and you can't have the other one," and I didn't want to be chair any more after that. I really didn't want to, because the whole thing about, you know, academic governance, the whole thing that we do it together, that this is not a dictatorship, ... that universities are uniquely un-hierarchical, suddenly, that wasn't true. [laughter] Jeez, I mean, ... and I had to go back to the committee of twenty and say, "It's her or nothing," and I was just embarrassed and outraged, because they had given the lie, it had absolutely had given the lie, to academic governance. Who the hell was I kidding that I was Chair of American Studies? What the hell was I [doing], what, pushing the paper? What the hell? ... So, when that happened, I really didn't want to be chair anymore. I wasn't bitter about it. I also didn't want to be chair because I wanted to write more books and feel freer, not feel responsible all the time. I mean, my whole life, in a way, has been like peeling an onion. It was so political, and it became less and less political. I may have said this before, you reach ... the "Y" in the road and it's the road not taken. It took me a long time [laughter] to decide which road, okay, because I was such a political animal. I mean, as a boy, I believed, you know, in the American dream. I wanted to be President of the United States. I'm absolutely dead serious. I was going to run for President of the [United States]. I got to be elected president of my high school; that was the beginning of my political career. [laughter] It didn't go very far, but, then, you know, the Foreign Service, and then, meeting Teddy Kennedy and Teddy Kennedy telling me he wanted me to join his staff. I thought he'd be President for sure. Then, Chappaquiddick happened, so, instead, I got out of the Foreign Service because of Vietnam and I ... went to state

government for a year, three years as a dean, and then, over thirty years as chair. [Editor's Note: On the night of July 18, 1969, Senator Edward Kennedy, who later claimed to have taken a wrong turn, drove his car off a bridge and into the water while returning home from a party on Chappaquiddick Island, Massachusetts. He swam to safety, but his passenger, Mary Jo Kopechne, perished. Her body was found in his submerged car the next day and Senator Kennedy pled guilty to leaving the scene of an accident after causing an injury.] It's like all of these things were the world, the political world, in some fashion, but, with each step, becoming a little less political, and then, finally, finally, not being Chair of American Studies anymore, giving up the last vestige, the last little inner corner, kernel, kernel? I don't know, center of that onion, or the apple; got down to the core of the apple. I don't know which metaphor we want to use here, and ... *finally* knowing who I was, that, ... at a pretty goddamn advanced age, finally knowing that I couldn't do everything and that I really wanted to write, even though I'd written a bunch of books already, but that I really cared more about literature and participating in literature, contributing to literature, that, professionally, that's what I really cared about, ... and that getting away from all this political stuff was an incredible liberation. [It] took me a long time, took me a long time to catch on to that, to really dig it ... and to not want power, not to want power at all, except to feel empowered, shall we say. That's a great concept. I mean, women, in particular, I think, taught us that, and, by the way, one thing I should mention is, being at Douglass College as a dean, and then, for so many years, before reorganization, it was so important to me to learn about women. I mean, I think I grew up as your standard macho guy. ... I really did. My first marriage, you know, was "Dick and Jane." She was a stay-at-home mom and I was the breadwinner, and Douglass did a lot for me and my wife, Patricia, my second wife. You know, she became a lawyer. ... Now, she's a full professor at Ramapo College, ... which is great, because, you know, we've got lots to talk about, [laughter] ... but Douglass did a lot for me in terms of thinking about women in a very different way, realizing I wasn't just attracted to women, but I also liked them, which is a different thing, you know, that I really liked them, that I wanted to be their friend. I wanted them to be my friends. That was a wonderful opportunity I had, hired at Douglass College as the male token in the Douglass Administration. [laughter] So, it was a great moment, and to realize that, to realize very early in the game, as the women's movement came on strong in the early '70s, that I had everything to gain from this. I wasn't going to lose, I was going to gain, that women being empowered allowed me to be empowered. ... I could slowly begin to get off this power thing and have more and more [freedom], and I've been a lot happier, I think, as a result, too, which is maybe the bottom line, ain't it?

SI: That is a good note to end on.

MR: Yes, that was a great line to end on. [laughter] ...

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Reviewed by Jessica Ondusko 9/1/10

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/4/11

Reviewed by Michael Aaron Rockland 1/19/11