

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Aaron Kemmerer

INCITE

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Aaron Kemmerer conducted by Sam Lutzker on January 27, 2018. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC

Session #1

Interviewee: Aaron Kemmerer

Location: Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Sam Lutzker

Date: January 27, 2018

Q: What did you have for lunch today?

Kemmerer: A bagel.

Q: That's crazy. I didn't have a bagel, actually. I was about to say I had a bagel.

Kemmerer: What did you have for lunch?

Q: I had Mexican food. But I had a bagel for breakfast. So, it was a good day for eating so far.

Kemmerer: Where did you go for Mexican food?

Q: I went to Rosito's Tacos [phonetic], I think, Rosita's Tacos.

Kemmerer: Cool. It's a good place.

Q: It was okay, yes. It wasn't bad, yes. I was pretty okay with it, which is—I'm such a Northern California Mexican food snob that it was good. I think we're ready to dive in. Are you comfortable, seating and everything?

Kemmerer: Yes, I feel fine.

Q: Let's both get a little comfortable. All right, great. So, let me just say for the record first that this is Sam Lutzker. It is Saturday, January 27th, 2018. And I am here at 5202—or is it 2502?

Kemmerer: Twenty-five oh two.

Q: Okay, you know better than I do. Twenty-five oh two Monument Avenue, where our research team is staying in an Airbnb, with Aaron—last name?

Kemmerer: Kemmerer.

Q: Kemmerer. Okay, I wasn't sure how to pronounce that.

Kemmerer: A lot of people don't know how. It's okay.

Q: Okay, great. Well, conducting an oral history for the Columbia University Study on White People, as it's known in the IRB, i.e. Facing Whiteness, i.e. Study on Whiteness, whatever you like. Aaron, thanks so much for letting me speak with you today.

Kemmerer: Yes, thanks for having me, Sam. It's interesting.

Q: Cool. So, I'd like to start out where many oral histories start out, which is where you came from—where you were born, something about your early life, really whatever you want to talk about. And you can talk about it as long as you'd like to.

Kemmerer: [00:02:19] Okay. I was born in Westwood, New Jersey, September 14th, 1990. And me and my mother and my sister lived there until I was about four years old. That's where most of my family is from, my grandfather and my grandmother on my dad's side, my dad. But, he dipped out. So, we ended up moving to Poway, California, which is outside San Diego, for about a decade, maybe less than that, I guess, eight years, maybe. And then, when I was eleven we moved to Virginia, to Arlington, Virginia, and then to Fredericksburg, Virginia where I lived for the rest of my youth, I guess. And then I moved to Richmond [Virginia] when I went to college at eighteen.

Q: So, you went from New Jersey to California?

Kemmerer: Mm-hmm.

Q: Then back to the East Coast, to Virginia?

Kemmerer: Yes.

Q: And you've stayed in Virginia since then?

Kemmerer: [00:03:26] Yes. Stints of traveling here and there, but this is where I've lived.

Q: Okay, yes. Do you have any memories from your time when you were in New Jersey?

Kemmerer: [00:03:37] Yes, I have a few memories. So, we lived in this one-bedroom apartment in a big yellow house, although my sister still lives in that area. My oldest half-sister lives in Nyack, New York. So sometimes when I go visit her we go back to the house.

Q: Oh, I've been through Nyack.

Kemmerer: You've been to Nyack?

Q: Yes, I've cycled through it. I used to be a cyclist.

Kemmerer: Nice. I can imagine it's a good place to cycle. Lots of hills.

Q: Yes, there's nice hills up there. Yes, I can picture it.

Kemmerer: [00:04:13] But yes, so it's interesting because I remember when I was kid thinking this house was huge. But then, going back there as an adult, it's actually not that big. It's like my child body thought that it was huge. But yes, my mom, I remember my mom worked at this bank up the road from the apartment that we were renting. And she raised me and my sister there for a few years until we left. So, I don't know. I mean, I was only there when I was a toddler. So, I

have some really weird kind of half-memories of it. But then it's highlighted because I've gone back with my sister and stuff. So, it's interesting.

Q: So, that kind of half-memory, you were thinking of the house and how big it looked at that time?

Kemmerer: [00:05:02] Yes. It was big to me. And the yard, especially, I just have this memory of it being this big expansive, like, as if it was a farm field or something. But it's really just like a small little plot of land, like a normal yard.

Q: And do you have any memory of the move when you left that place in New York, I guess? Or is that New Jersey?

Kemmerer: [00:05:27] It's like a cluster of towns on the border of New York and New Jersey: technically New Jersey, though. And yes, I do. I remember us all. So, my grandfather was a very interesting character. He was kind of like a hippie guy. He at one point belonged to a nudist colony. But then he converted to Christianity later in his life. So, that was interesting. I mean most of my family is like New York Jewish folks.

Q: Okay, great, same. Hi.

Kemmerer: [00:05:59] Hi. So, I have this memory, though, when we did move, of us going into a U-Haul. And we were driving across country to California. So, we had all these neighbors that

had gathered to say goodbye to us and stuff. And there was this other family that was living in the bottom apartment. And one of the kids had gotten their ears pierced or something. And I remember them having this whole conversation about me and how I'd never had my ears pierced. I've never actually had any piercings at all in my whole life. So, it was something that I weirdly hold onto, a weird conversation that was like our parting convo. But then me, my mom and my grandfather piled into this U-Haul together and drove across country.

Q: And what was that trip like?

Kemmerer: [00:06:50] It's also funny because I was four. So, I drove cross country when I was four. And then I also drove cross-country when I was eleven or twelve, I think, when we moved to Virginia. And I just remember being—my mind was blown by seeing all the things, because I'm just sitting in the passenger seat watching the world go by. And we ate a lot of fast food along the way. We stopped maybe once or twice in a hotel. And then, once we...

Q: You did it that quickly?

Kemmerer: [00:07:22] Oh yes. It was like, we're going. It wasn't like this leisurely trip. This was like we have to move because we're broke and we need to stay with the family, because we had family members out in California that were ready to let us stay with them. So, it was all kind of my mom just throwing caution to the wind and going. And yes, it was a wild trip. I remember when I got there, too, my grandfather was really excited to be in California, because he'd been in

New Jersey for so long. And he was kind of a hippie, like I said. So he was just like, oh, we've finally reached this amazing new hippie place.

Q: The promised land, yes.

Kemmerer: The promised land, exactly.

Q: That's funny. And tell me a little bit about—was it Paway or Poway?

Kemmerer: Poway.

Q: Poway, California, yes.

Kemmerer: [00:08:19] Poway is like a suburb outside of San Diego. So, it's closer to the desert than the beach, though. So, it's like, I mean, it's pretty affluent in certain parts. There's a lot of middle-class white families living there. But then there's also a lot of Latino folks. And I don't know how it looks now. I mean, I haven't been there in a decade, over a decade. I don't know. I remember it being very stratified economically. Like, we lived in an apartment complex that was pretty poor. My mom worked at a—what was the name of it—Pick N' Save? It's kind of like a dollar store or something like that.

Q: Yes, I actually grew up in California. Not San Diego, though. But I do actually think I've been to a Pick 'N Save.

Kemmerer: [00:09:10] Yes, that's where my mom worked. But I remember, too, going to school with these kids. I had a crush on this boy in my elementary school that was really rich. And so, he lived in this—you know in California how there's those stucco houses? They're modeled after mission-style houses. He lived in one of those. So, I was always kind of like, you're rich.

Q: And did that crush last your entire time in California?

Kemmerer: [00:09:41] No. He was totally cool, and I was really nerdy and just admiring him from afar. But, I don't know. I guess I still had a crush on him. But he was kind of like, way too cool for me.

Q: You said when you moved there you moved in the family, too. Which family was that? And what was that like?

Kemmerer: [00:10:11] It was my aunt on my dad's side. So, it's a little weird, I guess. I'm trying to veer from using that word in my own life. But, it's just unusual. My dad dipped out. He went in the military, and he was overseas for a lot of my childhood but also just uninvolved. But, his sister and his father, my grandfather, Pop-Pop, he kind of took us in. And my Aunt Betsy [phonetic], she also took us in. She was the one that was living in California when we met them out there.

Q: Your Aunt Betsy, that was your dad's sister?

Kemmerer: Yes.

Q: And your grandfather, who was previously part of the nudist colony, that was your father's father?

Kemmerer: [00:11:01] Yes. I would say that that was like the father figure in my life, though, Pop-Pop.

Q: Can you talk a bit more about your relationship with him?

Kemmerer: [00:11:12] Yes. He was pretty much my dad. I mean, he babysat me after school. He made me grilled cheese every Sunday. I actually have this really weird comfort food thing with tomato soup and grilled cheese where if I'm feeling sad, that's what I'd make for myself because that's what he used to make for me. But he also was a very sort of moral person. He had a lot of ideas about what was the right thing to do and how to live. So he tried to instill that in all of us because there was, like, me and all my cousins and my sister. So, he had a lot of ideas about what was right and wrong. And also, he was very calm. I never saw him really get mad except this one time when he was driving and this motorcycle almost crashed into us. But we were all in the car, like the kids were in the car. So he got really pissed and flipped them off. But, that was really the only time I saw him get mad. He was definitely a pretty important person in my life. He passed away when I was about thirteen or fourteen.

Q: And you said that he had some ideas about right and wrong. Do you have any memories of examples or examples of memories where you learned those ideas?

Kemmerer: [00:12:48] Yes. Unfortunately, he had some homophobic sentiments, which was frustrating to all of me and my cousins because almost all of us are queer. But that was definitely a thing where he felt like a moral judgment on. But also, in a better light – that was like the harsh side of his moral sentiment – but then, like I said, he converted to Christianity later in life. And he was very adamant about studying the bible. Actually, there was a blind man that frequently came to the same church as him. He was also homeless. The man was disabled and homeless. And he was kind of like shunned from the community in a way. He was welcome to come. But people weren't really clamoring to help him or whatever. And my grandfather was. He kind of tried to lead by example, I guess. He didn't espouse a lot. But he just really was action-oriented in that way, where he would bring someone in and be very concerned about the whole group.

Also, something I remember very distinctly about him, which I felt was like almost a moral thing, was that there was a small chapel attached to the church that he went to. And he spent, like, five years renovating it and repainting it. And it was super-committed to that, which was—I don't know, it was like him alone doing it. There were a few people that helped him here and there. But he was leader of that project.

Q: That sounds like quite a project.

Kemmerer: [00:14:42] It was, yes. It actually might have had something to do with why he passed away, because he was probably breathing lead paint when he was doing that project. That's what the doctors thought.

Q: Wow. And so, you moved back to Virginia when you were eleven. You moved back to the East Coast—sorry—when you were eleven, to Virginia. And what prompted that move?

Kemmerer: [00:15:08] My mother married a man. They actually knew each other when they were in high school and dated when they were in high school in New Jersey. And then, they reconnected on the internet, on, like, classmates.com or something. And then, we almost immediately moved, actually, because we were poor. She was working at Pick 'N Save for the entire time that we lived there. I think maybe at one point she worked at Kmart, which was like, we're really moving up. And then, he came into the picture. And they went back and forth a few times, you know, different visits. And he was just able to take better care of us. So, we moved out here.

Q: Oh, interesting. And what was your relationship like with him?

Kemmerer: [00:15:59] Pretty weird. I think he was really more interested in building a family with my mom. And he was kind of accepting of the fact that we were, me and my sister, were there. But that would not have been his ideal had he had a choice in it. So, it was kind of like, I think me and her sort of felt like a burden to them. But, you know, I will say he did the best he could to materially take care of us, which was a relief from what we'd experienced when we

were younger kids. So, it was kind of like a class ascension thing, in a way. But it's weird because he was better. But he was also extremely hardworking. He would leave at, like, 5:00 in the morning or earlier, and then not get home until like 9:00, which could have been him working the entire time or not. I mean, they're divorced now, too. So it's like a whole thing, you know? But yes, he just wasn't there very much but we had a house that he owned.

Q: And what was your life like when you came here to Virginia? Did it change in any major ways?

Kemmerer: [00:17:13] It was an extreme culture shock, because we moved to Spotsylvania [Virginia], which is like an hour north of here. It's right between Richmond and D.C. And my stepdad, he worked in D.C. So, it was cheaper, you know, to live in the suburbs, like in northern Virginia. Northern Virginia is like this creeping suburb that's just like moving out of DC further and further. So, Spotsylvania was cheaper because it was still more rural. So, the culture there, and still is—it was at the time, I guess, in 2001. And now, I mean, there's more development. But it's still very country. So, I mean, I've been pretty obviously queer and gender-nonconforming since I was seven. So, there was more reprimanding of my gender identity when I moved to Spotsylvania and more Christian sort of influence in the entire culture, or just more traditional. And definitely a lot of racists, and just the whole culture was just a lot less progressive than what I was raised in when I was in California.

Q: In terms of that culture and seeing that play out, do you have any memories of when you moved back here where you kind of realized that there was this cultural difference that was

playing out in all these different ways, like you said, like the Christianity, people's attitudes about gender, people's attitudes about race?

Kemmerer: [00:19:05] Yes, I do. One thing I remember, which is like miniscule-seeming, but I used to wear this backwards hat, like this baseball cap, when I was a kid all the time. And it was no problem when I was California. It was like, oh, it's whatever. But as soon as the first day, I got yelled at for wearing it inside. And I thought it was so strange. I was just like, what? Okay, I'll follow the rules, I guess, because I was kind of like a good kid, I guess. I wanted to do what the teachers told me to do. I also remember feeling—well, and this is also probably more so when I was in high school. There was a lot more centered around Christianity and trying to socially control things through that. Like, there was a lot of pressure to be a part of youth groups and prayer and prayer in schools. And when we tried to do, like, a gay-straight alliance, there was like—you know, someone did graffiti on it that said faggot, which was so disturbing to me, you know?

And around race, it was just—I don't know. Sometimes I really look back on it. And I think a lot of people would conceptualize California, or even New York and New Jersey, as having a more progressive culture around race. But I don't think that's really the case. I think more around gender and sexuality I feel that, you know? But, what was weird to me was the ways that people and kids my age were taught about race in school specifically here because of it being this whole Confederate history, and even a colonial history as well, I think that that was more instilled. Because I didn't go through elementary school in that setting, I didn't have that much instilled in me. It's almost just like they get them young so that they don't question anything. And it was just

disturbing because they had taken trips to, like, Jamestown. And they just were like, oh, this is fun. It's like Disneyland, you know? I don't know. It's just a weird indoctrination process that I noticed and that I didn't want to conform to.

Q: Interesting. Well, I have a question. Did you ever go on any of the mission trips when you were in California public schools?

Kemmerer: I did. I did, yes.

Q: Do you think there's a similarity there?

Kemmerer: [00:21:53] Absolutely. So, okay, that is a good point. And it's something that I thought about a lot because I'm like, okay, these folks and these kids went to, like, Jamestown or to these Confederate battlefield sites, because that's what Spotsylvania was, too; that's a battlefield. The whole county is essentially a battlefield because it's right between D.C. and Richmond. So it's where they clashed. But, reflecting on my own experiences going to mission trips and things in California, that was a whole other narrative that they were telling about this manifest destiny and the end of colonialism. It's almost like I got two parts to the story of colonialism. But, I think my teachers, in California, at least, I feel that at the time, in the early '90s, they were making more of an effort to educate us about indigenous people's history, not like here where actually indigenous people's history is still not a part of the curriculum, really.

So, I don't know whether I was just, I don't want to say lucky, but I guess that I just had teachers that were more conscious or something. But it definitely had a different flavor historically than what I think my peers here experienced. So, I don't know if that really answers the question.

Q: No, it was an interesting discussion, the difference.

Kemmerer: Yes. It's true, though.

Q: Yes, but you moved back here when you were eleven. So, I'm assuming that historical education would have still been happening, right?

Kemmerer: Mm-hmm.

Q: Do you remember any lessons or trips where maybe an alarm went off in your head or maybe you kind of noticed that something was being taught in a different way than you had previously learned it?

Kemmerer: [00:24:03] Well, I don't think that when I was in elementary school my teachers ever touched on slavery as a topic. But the way that slavery is taught in Virginia public schools is frankly disturbing. It's taught as if it was some kind of economic agreement that was created for a better economy. And the brutality of the history is never shared with the kids. And there's just some facts that are just plain wrong, like not true fact. So, I do remember, though, too, that there was this whole unit. And this is a little diversion, I guess. But they did so much around educating

us about the Holocaust, but so little about educating us about genocide that was happening, you know, where we were. It was like something that happens somewhere else, although I do know now that the history of education, historical education with the Holocaust, is something that the Jewish community has fought for to have incorporated in the school.

But, at the same time, it's still like that kind of avoidance of what has actually happened here, on the land that we're living on, and not emphasizing those realities at all—I'm trying to think specifically about something that happened. But, I think the main thing to highlight about where I lived in Spotsy was like I said, it's a battlefield. It's like we are learning this history in order to honor our Confederate slain soldiers, basically. And there are many field trips that go to those battlefields. And the people who control them are the Daughters of the Confederacy. They create all the signs. They maintain the property. They do all of that. So, it's super-biased. It's a haunting type of place.

Q: Speaking of the Confederacy, we're in Richmond right now.

Kemmerer: Yes, on Monument, too.

Q: Yes. What do you think of that, like, the monuments and stuff like that?

Kemmerer: [00:26:33] I mean, I think they need to be torn down as soon as possible. I've been a part of efforts to seek some kind of racial justice in this city of any type, right? I mean, there's so much injustice that's still going on. But the symbolic weight of that is so—it's just like

psychological terrorism every day. And in fact my job that I work now, I have to drive down Monument Avenue to get there every day. And I just put up my middle finger every time I drive by because it's so—I don't know. These battlefields all around Virginia. Every road, like, you know, Jeff [Jefferson] Davis Highway is Route 1. I think maybe in Ashland, which is like twenty minutes north, it's called George Washington Highway. But, I don't know. There's a lot of symbolic racism around. And that's the first thing that needs to go, in my opinion.

There was actually this really funny Facebook post or something about getting a monster truck to tear them down, like, similar to how they've been torn down in other places. But they're just so big here. You can't just be like, oh, we're going to take this down. I mean, the one that's right outside, the one of Jefferson Davis, it's huge. It would take a monster truck to tear it down. So, yes, I definitely think they need to go as soon as possible.

Q: You just mentioned as a form of symbolic racism. What other types of racism do you see playing out here in Richmond?

Kemmerer: [00:28:29] There's straight-up violence. I mean, I know someone who was attacked because he's black and queer. I know someone who has been arrested for that reason. That's a huge thing, I mean, police violence. But, like, police presence also. It's not just someone being killed or shot. It's also like the constant presence in black communities and in Latino communities. You know, I think that economically it's extremely stratified along racial lines. The city itself is segregated based on neighborhood still. I mean, there's some mixed-race neighborhoods, I would say, but very few. And it's also, it's like not much has actually changed.

I think a lot of people want to believe that something has changed here. But in my view, I guess I would consider myself a very—I don't know about history buff. That kind of sounds weird, like I'm going to historical sites every weekend or something.

But I just study history. And I just see a lot of repeated patterns. And even though it's 2018 there's still the same shit happening. So, I mean, actually there's something major that's been happening recently, which is the redevelopment, whatever you want to call it, of our transportation system. So, they cut off four bus stops in Churchill, which is a historically black neighborhood. And there's still a lot of folks there. It's kind of being gentrified right now. Well, really, it *is*. It's not kind of. It is. But, there are parts of it that are basically RHA, which is the Housing Authority housing. And they just cut off the transportation to that area. There's maybe one bus route or two bus routes that go there now. And that's just like a whole other thing.

I mean, even just looking at public transportation or education or jobs, like, you can look at those three areas, and there's racial segregation in all of those areas of life. I mean, I feel like I could go on about this for a really long time. I don't know how in-depth you want me to go in this question.

Q: Yes. I mean, this interview is more supposed to be focused on your own identity in the world. But, we also obviously want to give it a sense of place. But yes, it's actually good that you're cutting yourself off a little bit, because we could go forever in that direction. And that may not be the place we want to go in our hour.

Kemmerer: [00:31:20] Yes. I just could opine about this for a long time. But, I mean, also to sort of speak to what you're saying, I think that my identity, and especially if I'm thinking about whiteness, it's very much informed by where I am. Like, if my whole history, if I had stayed in New Jersey, I wouldn't have the same perspective at all, you know? I mean, it's always been informed by witnessing of what's going on around me.

Q: Yes. And do you remember the first time that you noticed your own whiteness?

Kemmerer: [00:32:00] I think when I was a kid. I used to skateboard with these kids in my apartment complex. And a lot of them were from the Philippines. There was a heavy concentration of Filipinos.

Q: This was in California?

Kemmerer: [00:32:14] In California, yes. And they just kind of made fun of me because I was white. That's when I started realizing that I was white.

Q: How did that make you feel when they were making fun of you because you were white?

Kemmerer: [00:32:31] It was complicated because I also didn't know. Also, some of them thought I was a boy, which I was, I guess, in a sense. But I was born female. So, I didn't know whether they were making fun of me because I was white or because they thought I was queer or what it was that they were making fun of me about. But they just knew that I was different from

them. And that's when the realization of difference, I think—it was never exclusionary. It's never like they were like, you can't hang out with us. They would just jab at me, you know? So, I don't think I was necessarily hurt by it. But it just was a recognition like, okay, this is clearly something that is happening in the world that I'm a part of this different group than them. And there's some history to this here clearly because they're making a note of it, you know? I don't know if that really answers that question or not.

Q: Yes, that's a great answer to the question. I actually had a similar story, not so much along a gender line when I was questioning that or whether or not people were excluding me for that. But, I had friends who were Vietnamese. And there was a big family of Vietnamese people. And I remember the older brother always called me Whitey. No, I became White Boy. That's what I was. And it was kind of like a weird feeling. It didn't really feel specifically mean. But it definitely just 100 percent—not 100 percent, but it really triggered that memory in mind, actually. I haven't thought of that memory for a really long time, so that's really interesting.

Kemmerer: [00:34:16] I mean, but I would say, too, there was a very noticeable shift in my life and the way that I perceived race when I moved here because that's when it became—because the way that I think I performed whiteness was different. They used to call me California, right? So, they would be like, 'Okay, California', you know what I'm saying? So, I think that it was just different to a lot of folks of color who were used to a more bigoted type of whiteness, I guess. But I was performing this other type of whiteness that they also pointed out.

Q: Do you remember any instances where they pointed that out and you kind of realized how it was something like a different type of whiteness?

Kemmerer: [00:35:07] I mean, I always felt this distinction of myself from the other white people that I went to school with, because most of them, at least, were raised in Virginia and country. So, like I said, it was like an indoctrination that they went through that I didn't go through. And there's also other aspects of that, too, like poor white people versus WASP-y white people, you know, people who are just openly bigoted versus people who are privately, I guess. I don't know. Yes, I think that that experience with going into middle school, which is like the worst social time anyways, I kind of isolated in that situation because I didn't understand the social rules around race. I don't know. It's kind of weird to think about.

Q: Middle school or the social rules?

Kemmerer: [00:36:17] Yes, middle school is definitely weird to think about. But that specific part of middle school, of not wanting to be grouped in with other white people, like, I moved there. I was new. But I also knew that they were oppressive. There was some oppressive thing that I didn't want to be a part of with that group. But, they also were anti-queer. So, it kind of was like I automatically wasn't a part of that group anyway. I don't know.

Q: How did you realize that they were oppressive at that age?

Kemmerer: [00:37:07] I mean, they walked to school with a Confederate flag on their hat. I didn't know what that meant until I came here. Like, I'd never seen that before. But once I did learn what it meant I was like, okay. It's just really open. And then also, I mean, one thing that I always noticed, too, is like when we had a choice, like, at lunch where we were going to sit, it's always segregated. Folks didn't hang out in mixed-race groups. There were no multiracial groups. If someone did get into a multiracial situation it was rare and it was also pointed out a ways. It was like, 'Oh, this is happening right now. Wow, this is actually happening right now.'

Q: And what was the approximate demographic breakdown of the school in terms of race? Was it an overwhelmingly white school or...?

Kemmerer: [00:38:12] I would say it was majority white. But there was definitely—maybe like three quarters white and a quarter black, in my memory. But also that doesn't include other racial categories. So, there were definitely smaller pockets of immigrant communities. I don't know; there were definitely a few. Maybe there was, like, one or two in each classroom who was Latino or Asian or something like that.

Q: So, you mentioned lunchtime. Where did you find yourself sitting at lunchtime?

Kemmerer: [00:38:56] With two or three punk friends, probably. Actually, I still am friends with some of those folks. But we were just like the freak table.

Q: And then that was middle school. And you were up in northern Virginia. And you said you moved one more time.

Kemmerer: [00:39:23] I moved to Richmond.

Q: You moved to Richmond when you were eighteen, right?

Kemmerer: [00:39:26] Well, yes. I guess I was seventeen, almost eighteen.

Q: So you also were in that part of northern Virginia for high school, too?

Kemmerer: Mm-hmm.

Q: Was that any different for you than middle school?

Kemmerer: [00:39:39] Only in the sense of emotional growth. I think the social conditions were pretty much the same. But, I got more into my politics, you know? And also being exposed to these social conditions for so long, like, starting to try to break them down a little bit. And also, the thing I mentioned about us trying to start a gay-straight alliance, that happened in high school. And I think that's something that has actually really changed or brought people into multiracial groups, in my experience, is when we're queer, because being queer in a small town in Virginia, we're going to have to stick together, you know, no matter what race we are.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the formation of the gay-straight alliance that you all were doing at your high school?

Kemmerer: [00:40:41] Yes. It was a group of us that wanted to start having meetings because people always would say, in the halls or in classrooms or whatever, just throw around the word “gay” all the time. And it was just becoming a really big problem for us. And we had our choir teacher or whatever, who was sponsoring it. And then we put up one flyer. It was defaced. And the school canceled the meetings and said we couldn’t do it.

Q: Wow. This was the flyer where the person wrote the graffiti on it, right?

Kemmerer: Yes.

Q: And the principal’s reaction to that was that you couldn’t have any more meetings? Do you remember the rationale that the principal gave?

Kemmerer: [00:41:33] They said that it was causing a disturbance of the school, that us trying to organize it was disturbing the peace of the school or whatever. So, I think they identified us as the root cause of the problem instead of the person who did this graffiti. And then we just kind of—it was a silencing technique. There was no more organizing for the gay students after that. It was just like, okay, we can’t do this here.

Q: Was there any organizing among the black or other minority group students in your high school?

Kemmerer: [00:42:27] Yes. Well, I mean, I can't really speak to their organization, like what it was like in depth. But I know that they were...

Q: Well, you don't need to either.

Kemmerer: [00:42:41] I mean, I know that they were very supportive of one another. And a lot of their families were interconnected. They lived in the same neighborhoods. They went to the same churches. Their families knew each other. They may have been related in some way. I don't know. And I think their reaction to the environment was power in numbers, essentially. So, just to make sure everyone was okay.

Q: I guess my question was just that they saw your organizing along the lines of sexuality and gender as something that's going to disrupt the school in some way. But I was wondering if it was a similar silencing among organizing among black students or anything like that.

Kemmerer: [00:43:45] I think that most of the organizing, the publicly—I don't know how to say it. There were legitimate organizations, which I think were mostly revolving around sports and faith. I remember specifically the step team. The step team was the most badass because they had all these black women that were like this is how we organize. This is like our group. But they can't tell them not to have a fucking step team. And I also think that's a really good question

because I think that though it is—I think because it is such a racially tense and segregated area, there's a higher consciousness, in some levels, about that. The white administration knows that it would look super-racist if they tell people that they can't have an all-black group.

That's an interesting thing to think about, the step team, because I remember there being one white girl who wanted to join. She was friends with them. They wanted her to join, too. But it was just this big thing in the school, like 'Oh, this white girl's going to be on the step team'. I don't know. It's just an interesting thing to think about. But no, the administration never would have stopped them from organizing. Now, if somebody had put the N word on their flyers, I don't know what would have happened. I mean, that word was thrown around at our schools. But I don't think it would have been posted on a flyer.

Q: That's kind of what I was getting at, was just like those are both slurs that I remember with different frequencies being thrown around in my middle school and high school. And I was wondering if there was maybe a different reaction to the words being thrown around in terms of the organizations combating that type of hate. And another reaction, like, would someone write that kind of graffiti on a flyer?

Kemmerer: [00:46:03] They probably wouldn't write it because, like I said, it's weird. It's like this consciousness about how that's not the right thing to do because we are in this area where there's that history. But I think behind closed doors, absolutely. That word was used, and still is used, in a very deliberate and oppressive sense. And I think also I remember there being several conversations or community sort of talk about black folks using that word, but white people not

being allowed to; or whether it's appropriate for a white person to ever say that word. But I don't think it would have ever been written. And if it had been written, it would have been taken down immediately. And I don't know if the principal would have had the same reaction to that, just because of this racial consciousness. Sometimes it's like a racial paranoia, almost.

Q: And how many of you were there in the gay-straight alliance?

Kemmerer: [00:47:19] There were probably like ten or fifteen of us in the first meetings. But that was also including allies or whatever, people like these straight friends that we had.

Q: And were you officially disbanded by the principal at the meeting?

Kemmerer: [00:47:37] No. They told us not to post flyers anymore and that we shouldn't do this, basically. They were just like this is causing a disturbance. And then we were just discouraged and didn't meet after that.

Q: Did you all meet in a non-organizational capacity? Or was there any sort of continued support or any conversations?

Kemmerer: [00:48:01] I mean, I think the most support that we created for ourselves was through musical community. A lot of us were involved with music or theater or whatever. So we just continued doing those things. And it was an informal gay club or something. I don't know. It's like that.

Q: So were you in music or theater?

Kemmerer: [00:48:21] I played music. I was a stagehand sometimes. But I never performed onstage. But I definitely played music a lot. I love to play music.

Q: What musical instruments do you play?

Kemmerer: [00:48:31] I play guitar, sing. I used to sing a lot more. But I don't sing as often. Yes, that's what I do.

Q: Cool. I was in the musical community in my high school, too.

Kemmerer: What do you play?

Q: I played saxophone back then. So, I was in the wind ensemble, I think it was called.

Kemmerer: Do you still play the sax?

Q: No. I don't have time anymore.

Kemmerer: I love the saxophone, though.

Q: That's really cool. Do you still play music?

Kemmerer: [00:49:05] Mm-hmm, I do. I mostly just play by myself now. I try to practice as much as I can because it's very calming to me. So, I just play guitar, sing some songs. I like to cover. That makes me feel like...

Q: You like to cover songs?

Kemmerer: [00:49:15] Cover songs, yes. I just like to play covers of songs that I like. It makes me feel like I might have some entertainment value if I'm at a campfire or at some kind of gathering. I don't know.

Q: What are some of the songs that you find you really gravitate towards?

Kemmerer: [00:49:35] I only sing sad songs. So it's like, it's funny thinking about high school and middle school, too, because I was obsessed with Bright Eyes. And that's something that I still play every now and then. I don't know. I like to also cover blues and soul songs a lot, like old, 1-4-5 blues type of things.

Q: Have you written any of your own blues?

Kemmerer: [00:50:08] yes, sometimes. I mean, that's usually my go-to when I'm just writing a basic riff, is like a blues riff. I like to solo. I don't know. A lot of times I'll consider myself more

of a rhythm guitarist. But I do like to play some blues solos. That's usually what I do if I'm playing up the neck at all. I'm just playing blues.

Q: Do you sing at all—

Kemmerer: [00:50:35] Yes, I sing a little bit.

Q: —when you play? Do you write your own lyrics? I guess that was my question.

Kemmerer: [00:50:38] I do. Yes, I do write my own lyrics, which I rarely share with anyone else. It's just like my journaling type of thing that I do. A lot of times, too, I don't record or write anything down. I just play a song and let it go into the ether, and then it's done.

Q: Totally, yes. That's awesome. So, how did you come to Richmond?

Kemmerer: [00:51:08] I came to VCU. VCU is like the place where people come when they are from a small town in Virginia. Like, if you are like I really want to get out of this town, then let me go to Richmond, go to VCU. It's the easiest way to get out of a small town. I was lucky to be able to actually have college to go to here. Some people just come, and they try to figure it out. But yes, that was 2008.

Q: And what did you study when you were at VCU?

Kemmerer: [00:51:49] I studied philosophy and gender studies. I started studying philosophy. I didn't know what I was going to study at first. But then I started with a philosophy major and then later also majored in gender studies. So I got a dual degree.

Q: And you said before that VCU was like this place that was getting you out of a small town. What was that like when you arrived there?

Kemmerer: [00:52:18] Well, I'd had a couple of friends who'd already come before. And so I would sometimes make the trip down here to go to a show or do whatever. So I kind of was familiar. It felt like, okay, I'm just coming to this place where I've been coming for the past few years anyways. But, it was exciting. It was like a good move of independence. I didn't have to live at my stepdad's house anymore, so that was cool. It was also, I think, challenging for me because there was a lot of drinking and drugs going on around me. So I was really trying not to get too sucked into that and focus on school. But, it was great. I loved being able to see music all the time and meet queer people and just feel—there was a sense of freedom from what I had experienced at home.

Q: My belly just growled, too.

Kemmerer: Oh, no. This recording is going to be terrible. My belly has been growling this whole time. I hope it doesn't fuck it up.

Q: No, I really think it's totally fine.

Kemmerer: I'm sure they can be transcribed even if there's some belly growls happening.

Q: Oh, no. You can listen to the audio. It'll be totally fine. Yes, so you originally came to Richmond in—that was 2010 you said, 2009?

Kemmerer: [00:53:44] Two thousand eight.

Q: Two thousand eight? Okay. How have you changed since then? And how has the city changed? Kind of like walk me through those years in a way, if you can.

Kemmerer: [00:54:03] Well, I've changed in the sense that I'm twenty-seven, right? So, I've been through a very formative time in my life where I know more so who I am and what I believe. The city itself, I feel very connected to it. Like, I feel this is my home now because I've been here for, I guess, ten years. So I've watched it change. And I've been disappointed at times and also frustrated and outraged at times about the ways that it changed and also excited and happy to be a part of the community. I think actually I should switch those two things around. I'm usually just more thrilled that I'm part of a community here because it's really very supportive, especially when I think about the music community and the queer community here. It's small. So we have to sort of have each other's backs in a lot of ways.

But, the city as a whole, it's been really frustrating. There's probably over twenty breweries that have popped up in the past couple of years. There's, like, fifteen or more lofts that have been

built. There have been endless attempts to degrade the history of the city by putting in these sort of like gentrifying elements. So that's been a fight, and just it's annoying to me. It's like there's all these people that are coming here that are trying to do things that I'm just like, stop. But, I think I've grown a lot stronger in my politics because of that over the years. So, I'm saltier now than I used to be, I guess. I was more innocent when I first moved here, or like wide-eyed. And now I'm just kind of like, this is happening again. Okay. I don't know. I try not to get too jaded because I'm only twenty-seven. But yes, I've definitely seen some things happen.

I don't know, though. The community also, it's becoming more—especially in the punk scene, it's becoming much more conscious, I think. There are more women involved. There are more trans people involved, people of color. There's just more of openness to that and a true control that's happening from those people. And it's no longer as much this, like, white male-dominated punk scene. So that's good to see. And I'm very lucky to be able to go to those kinds of shows and be around those people.

Q: That's great. You mentioned your punk friends in middle school and high school, too.

Kemmerer: [00:57:05] It's funny when you say it like that. I guess I said it like that. Yes, I don't know. No, it's true.

Q: I also had punk friends, too. I really don't know what else to call them, honestly, at this point. But yes, are you a part of the punk scene? In what way are you a part of the punk scene? You mentioned it a few times now.

Kemmerer: [00:57:27] Yes, I mean, I guess. It sounds weird. Like, really, it sounds weird. I can't believe I said that earlier, too, like my punk friends. It just sounds weird. But, I definitely identify with that. I love punk music. I mean, I think the main way that I started becoming involved with it as a scene was through doing Girls Rock, because Girls Rock is rooted in punk. You know, it sort of came out of these retired Riot Grrrl people that were seeking to—I don't know if you're familiar with the...

Q: What is Girls Rock?

Kemmerer: [00:58:07] So, it is a summer camp that is for girls and trans youth. And we started the one in Richmond in 2010. And it's free in Richmond. It's just a weeklong camp where they learn to play guitar, drums or bass or whatever. They form a band. And then at the end of it they play a show. So, I've been organizing with that for a while. And we've had a lot of support from the punk community. Like, shows that benefit us. And there are a lot of women who have been frustrated with the male dominance in the scene. And then they have shown their support in various ways through donations, through volunteering. Yes, I would say that's how I'm involved, but I don't know [laughs].

Q: So, just in terms of the city of Richmond and its geography, where do you spend your time here?

Kemmerer: [00:59:27] Now I live in Southside. I used to live in Jackson Ward, which was—there's a lot of gentrification happening in Jackson Ward. When I was in school that's where I lived because it's very close to campus. And it's also—well, I don't know. There's multiple reasons why I lived there. At the time it was a cheaper area to live. So, also, I don't know how familiar you are with the city. But there's like The Fan, which is a more affluent, white neighborhood. And then there's VCU. And then it kind of goes into Jackson Ward, which is a historic black neighborhood. Actually, I did this huge research project about it. It used to be called Black Wall Street. And also, The Harlem of the South was another name for it. So there's a lot of history of arts and culture in Jackson Ward.

So that's where I spent a lot of my time when I was in school and or a few years after that. But now I live in Southside, which is across the river, because it's way cheaper over there. And it's more like a suburban offshoot of the city. Sometimes when I tell people where I live, they wonder if I live in Chesterfield County, actually, because it's closer to the county.

Q: Oh really? You live that far on the south side that you're near the county?

Kemmerer: [01:00:50] If you didn't know my ZIP code you might think it was Chesterfield County. That's where I spend my home time. But I still work on the side. So it's like right now I work off Monument, too. So it's weird to me, too, because I have spent, historically, I think, much more time in places like Churchill and Jackson Ward. But now my life is in Southside and near Willow Lawn, which is off Monument. So, yes, it's a little bit different for me the past couple of years.

Q: What do you do now?

Kemmerer: [01:01:25] I work for the YWCA. So, I work for the crisis response team. And recently, I just started working for the housing crisis line. I used to work for the domestic violence hotline. So, we do a lot of stuff. We try to help people to stop evictions and pay their utility bills if that's threatening them to be evicted. But also we help with traditional homelessness services through shelters. So, that's what's happening work-wise.

END OF KEMMERER_AARON 1

Kemmerer Aaron 2

Q: So, I think we're kind of winding up our time right now. But I wanted to make sure to give you some space just to talk about anything that you feel like we left off the table or anything you want to mention, really, about your life or specifically whiteness, because this is for Study on White People.

Kemmerer: [00:00:28] I don't know. I feel like I'm supposed to say something insightful right now. But I don't know what else I can—I feel like I didn't talk about whiteness that much. But I guess any white person just talking about their life kind of discusses it, right? It sort of touches on the subject. But I just have so many opinions about the way white people behave here. And sometimes I think it's an issue of, like, there's no self-awareness, you know? And that's

something I'm trying to work on in myself is to not be critical of others as much as I am of myself. I'm striving now to stop placing this blame on other white people and really just thinking about my own self as a white person and what I'm doing to perpetuate or push back against racist shit that's happening.

I think a lot of it really seems miniscule, you know? It can appear to be this petty type of things sometimes to people. But it's that microaggression, that daily microaggression that happens, that I think I'm trying to become more conscious of, especially in a city like this one with the history that it has. So, yes, I don't know. I'm not sure. I guess that's it.

Q: Totally. And specifically, I mean, I'm sure there's many microaggressions. But before you mentioned the breweries and stuff like that. I mean, not that that's a microaggression, but like...

Kemmerer: [00:02:14] Well, a microbrewery aggression. I don't know.

Q: So, do you drink beer at all?

Kemmerer: [00:02:21] I do. I'm trying not to as much, but yes, I do.

Q: Where would you go to drink beer? Would you avoid these breweries?

Kemmerer: [00:02:28] I would avoid all bars. I usually drink beer on my friend's porch.

Q: That's great. I like porches.

Kemmerer: [00:02:34] Yes. But the place I would probably go if I was going out for a beer would be Strange Matter or Ipanema. I used to go to Ipanema a lot. Those are two bars that are right next to each other on Grace Street, which has a very interesting history. If you're interested in the history of Richmond, definitely check out the history of Grace Street, because it was very seedy. And then VCU kind of cleaned it up, or "cleaned it up."

Q: I think I've actually been to Strange Matter.

Kemmerer: If you've been to a show, they have a lot of shows. But yes, I try to avoid all of that shit because it's so—I mean, even those places that I enjoy, there's definitely some racist elements to both of those scenes. Ipanema is a vegan/vegetarian place. There's mostly white people that work there and go there. I don't know. That might be false, but I don't know. That's the vibe I get. And then, the microbreweries, though, and all the people that barhop, like, in Shockoe Bottom and stuff, it's all just like white bro, people that come from the suburbs and are coming to the city to have a night out or whatever. Or most of them, at least. Or maybe they've already moved here. I don't know. They started with a night out, and then they bought a loft or something. I don't know.

Q: And what about them annoys you?

Kemmerer: [00:04:09] So many things. Like, the way that they behave when they're drunk, because before I started working for the Y [YWCA], I worked in a lot of bars and restaurants, usually just doing dishes or picking up shifts or whatever. And I just, I mean, people in bars are annoying to me on that level just from the perspective of customer service. But, they do that kind of thing where they do come in for like—you know, they see it. And then their eyes are big. And then they start buying things or buying properties. And they also don't understand what they're doing. They don't know the impact of what they're doing when they come in. They make comments. They say things that are rude and insensitive. And also, I just know, too, that the incidence of sexual assault and just general patriarchal bullshit is happening in that scene. So, yes, it's all just sports. I don't know. I just can't deal with them very well.

Q: Do you think the way that they act, though, if it is different, how is it different than other scenes of white people, like the punk scene maybe before it became more diversified in a lot of ways? Is it that different?

Kemmerer: [00:05:40] That's a good question. I actually don't think it's that different. I think that it's in a different costume. It has a lot to do with the aesthetics, too. Just because someone is wearing a vest with pins on it doesn't mean that they can't act like a belligerent asshole, too. And they do, you know? And that's like...

Q: Or racist, yes.

Kemmerer: [00:06:04] Well, yes. When I say belligerent, I mean that they're saying—I guess the idea I'm having, or just all these memories of seeing people just start talking out of their ass and saying things politically that I find disturbing once they become drunk. Well, I don't want to sound like I'm either talking shit on the punk community, because I think there is a slightly higher level of consciousness, even among the white dudes in that scene, you know? I don't know what the white bros are saying because I don't hang out with them because I just never can stand them. But I've overhead things when I'm working, just saying openly racist things as they get drunker, or even if they're not drunk. So, yes, that's really disturbing, I guess. I try to avoid it as much as I can.

I think also because there's so much controversy, right, when people are drinking, they're having a political conversation, maybe. And then, just the opinions, you know, when someone says something about something they know nothing about, like the opinions about the monuments, for example, that's a huge conversation. Everybody in the city has an opinion about this. But the total lack of understanding of the history of those monuments and the history of slavery in general, or a misconception about it, or like an indoctrinated truth about it, is just so widespread. It's very common to hear people defending the monuments or the police or just the idea that black folks don't need to be treated equally, essentially. Sometimes I think it's shocking to people who are not from this area. But, it's pretty regular here.

Q: More regular here than in other places, you think?

Kemmerer: [00:08:15] I mean, I think so, just because what I'm saying is like this is like a citywide conversation, right, about the monuments and other things that have come up, too, over the years. They were going to build a stadium in Shockoe Bottom, which is really spiritually disturbing because it is a site of where there was a lot of slave trade. And there's a burial ground there for people who were enslaved. It's just this disturbing type of idea that comes out, that that's an appropriate place to build a baseball stadium. So, those conversations, when they're happening, and when they come up, and people think it's like regular things to talk about at bars, you just hear this regular—it's like an everyday thing.

Q: Yes. Race is like kind of an everyday almost topic of conversation, and like local conversation, in a way?

Kemmerer: Yes, exactly.

Q: And that's different than other places, you think?

Kemmerer: [00:09:17] I mean, I think it is. I mean, I guess maybe because my family is in New York, I go to New York. That's where I see the contrast.

Q: In New York City or just New York State?

Kemmerer: [00:09:26] Just in the area. I mean, I go to New York City sometimes. But that's not where my family lives. And maybe it's because I'm with my family there. I don't know. But

that's the contrast that I see. And I hate to reify that north-south divide as if that's a real thing. But, I do see some different things that happen here that would not fly there at all, like Confederate flags being waved everywhere. I mean, there have been Confederate flags on highways that are on private property so you can see them from the highway. And then there's no way for the government to actually take them down. So, that kind of shit just wouldn't happen in New York, I feel like, at least not close to New York City. Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know.

[END OF INTERVIEW]