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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Susan Griffin

*Susan Griffin:  
The Joy and Power of Community*

The SLATE Oral History Project

Interview conducted by  
Amanda Tewes  
in 2019

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Susan Griffin, photo by Irene Young, c. 2012

**Susan Griffin** is an accomplished writer, and was a member of the UC Berkeley student political organization SLATE in the early 1960s. Griffin grew up in Los Angeles, California. She attended UC Berkeley, where she became active in SLATE, attending protests and engaging in political discussions. Griffin left Berkeley in 1963, but continued to work as a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area, producing many works, including *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. Over the years, Griffin remained active in causes of social justice, including the women's movement and antiwar protests. In this interview, Griffin discusses growing up in Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s, including her early exposure to McCarthyism; attending UC Berkeley in the early 1960s; joining SLATE and participating in political activities on and off campus, as well as running for ASUC representative; becoming involved with the women's movement; gender inequalities in SLATE; SLATE reunions; and SLATE's impact on her political thinking and activism.

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Interview 1: February 19, 2019

01-00:00:00

Tewes: Here we go. This is an interview with Susan Griffin for the SLATE Oral History Project for the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes at Ms. Griffin's home in Berkeley, California, on February 19, 2019. So thank you so much for speaking with me today. I wanted to start off with the very basics. When and where were you born?

01-00:00:26

Griffin: I was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1943, January [twenty-sixth], to be specific.

01-00:00:32

Tewes: January 1943, so right at the beginning.

01-00:00:34

Griffin: City of Angels Hospital.

01-00:00:36

Tewes: Wow. And did you grow up in LA?

01-00:00:39

Griffin: Yes. Well, I grew up in LA, but LA is like the Bay Area: it has different locations within it. So part of my childhood was spent in the San Fernando Valley, off and on. I was there for one period with my parents when I was five and six, and then I was there again when I was nine and ten, and then I was there during my teenage years.

01-00:01:07

Tewes: And where were you in the meantime, when not—

01-00:01:09

Griffin: Los Angeles.

01-00:01:10

Tewes: Just the larger—

01-00:01:10

Griffin: Los Angeles. And if you know Los Angeles, there's an area around LA High School. We were just the other side of Olympic Boulevard and near Highland, Olympic and Highland. So, that's the neighborhood.

01-00:01:31

Tewes: Tell me a little bit about your family.

01-00:01:34

Griffin: In general?

01-00:01:36

Tewes: Yeah. Did you have any siblings?

01-00:01:39

Griffin: Yes, I had a sister; she's died now. She was six-and-a-half years older than me. My father was a fireman and my mother a housewife. They divorced when, as I said, when I was five or six years old. That's when we moved out of the Valley and back into the city. It was a very difficult divorce for my sister and I because we were separated. We weren't given to one parent, actually. I was raised for a few years after the divorce by my grandmother and my sister was sent to my great aunt, and my great aunt lived in the north in Davis near Sacramento. So, that separation was very hard. It was like in one day I lost everybody in my family, although I was close to my grandparents. I loved them, but they were much more old fashioned and they had a different sense of discipline than my parents. My parents were very laissez-faire. My mother was severely alcoholic, which was why I wasn't given to her. And my father, men didn't raise children, for the most part alone, if it could be avoided. He was a fireman, too, so he worked. He was often overnight at the fire station. And then, I was moved back and forth. My mother wanted me back when she remarried, but her alcoholism continued, so I was only with her for about two years—she and my stepfather—and I went back to my grandparents. Then when I was a teenager, my grandmother felt she couldn't really continue to raise me, so I went to live with my mother again. But my mother was still quite alcoholic and became emotionally abusive, and I called my father and said, "I can't live here anymore." So I moved in with my father, and then—this is sort of like a story out of Dickens; it sounds much worse than it really was—but anyway, he was killed crossing a street.

01-00:04:01

By that time, I was working as an au pair with a family that were the parents of a friend of mine. And actually, I was working for them. I've got some income, but the main reason was so I could spend time with them, and I think they knew that and they had already almost adopted me as their daughter. After my father died, they became my legal guardians and I lived with them. They were very progressive. They had been members of the Communist Party, so in a way I'm a red diaper baby by adoption, but they left during the period when the Soviets invaded Hungary. They were wonderful people. Mort was an artist and a sculptor. This is one of his sculptures right here—

01-00:05:03

Tewes: How lovely!

01-00:05:04

Griffin: —Morton Dimondstein. And maybe later, you can capture this: in back of you, there's a portrait of me he painted—

01-00:05:13

Tewes: Oh, that's cool.

01-00:05:14

Griffin: —during that period.

01-00:05:14

Tewes: Yeah, we'll—should get that in the shot.

01-00:05:16

Griffin: And, my adoptive mother, [Geraldine], was a teacher and worked in teaching the arts, particularly dance, and wrote a couple of books about that. So, that was a godsend that they were there for me at that time, because it was a hard time.

Even before I became part of their family, I was already progressive. I was quite close with my sister, even though she lived in the north of the state, and she had a huge influence on me. She was writing poetry, and she told me that she thought we ought to recognize Red China. So whatever she said, I took as a very impressive thing to try to learn. So I followed her arguments and in a debate class, I said I thought we should recognize Red China, that it was foolish to pretend that such a huge country didn't exist. This was in the midst of McCarthy period. Well, there were three or four people, women—they were all girls—who were red diaper babies in my debate class, and so they all were very excited that there was somebody who had their opinion. It was a progressive opinion. Not a lot of people felt that way, and sometimes when they felt that way they didn't express it because they were afraid. McCarthyism was very, very repressive. Ironically, it was the closest that America came to being like Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin.

So, they befriended me and I learned a lot from them. One of my friends from that class was named Susie Steinberg. I was the poet and she was the artist; that's the way we kind of divided the labor. Susie's father was Henry Steinberg. He was one of the Smith Act cases, and he was still in the Communist Party. He would drive us to these field trips, Susie and her sisters and me, and we'd go into Los Angeles proper—because this was all happening in the San Fernando Valley, Reseda. We'd go into Los Angeles proper to the Los Angeles Public Library. Since then, I've spoken there twice and been a celebrity author at one of their dinners. But at that time, I was a kid, and I was thrilled to go there and thrilled by the [frescoes]. You could listen to long-playing records, recordings. They had a fabulous recording library, and—

01-00:08:14

Tewes: Wow, you've come full circle.

01-00:08:16

Griffin: What?

01-00:08:16

Tewes: You've come full circle.

01-00:08:17

Griffin:

I've come full circle, yeah. So, but Henry suggested that I read *Looking Backwards* by Ralph Bellamy, which is a utopian book about a future socialist society, and I was very impressed by that. My adoptive father Mort gave me a lot of reading to do, too, and he was very encouraging [of] my writing and gave me some great advice. There were some short poems I wrote that he loved, and then I worked on them and I ruined them because they had a simple kind of purity, and he told me that. He said, "You've overworked them." He would talk to me a lot about the art process and how sometimes something is just right, and then you don't keep on trying to make it even better. So, I was very fortunate, I learned a lot. And so that was my childhood.

01-00:09:25

Tewes:

Can I ask—

01-00:09:25

Griffin:

There's probably more to say, but anyway, that—

01-00:09:29

Tewes:

No, that was a great intro, too. I'm interested, you were born during World War II and I'm wondering—

01-00:09:35

Griffin:

Yes, 1943, yeah.

01-00:09:37

Tewes:

—how that played into your life, growing up knowing that this was something big that had happened to your family, to the country.

01-00:09:46

Griffin:

Actually, I'm writing about that now. I'm writing a book about the confluence between fascism and sexual predation, because it's the same psychology. It's not the same ideology, but as far as justifications, it's very close. They alarmingly mirror each other.

And so as part of that, I traveled backwards in time to the period when I first learned about the Holocaust. The memory that came to me was from about 1948, or it was probably '49, and I was six years old and I had just been initiated into the Brownie [Girl] Scout Troop. My parents, as I said before, had been divorced and I was living with my grandmother. She brought me to the Brownie Scout Troop and enrolled me, which was a very wise thing for her to do. I was with this group of girls, and we were driving home from our Brownie Scout meeting, and the other girls started this game, which was to go, "*Heil* Hitler," and with their hand out. It was a gesture that all of us had seen in the movies. In those days, they had newsreels with movies. We didn't have television, but there were these newsreels at the movies, and we saw people making that gesture. We had no idea what it meant. And so these girls were making that [gesture], and so I starting making that with them. We were all laughing hilariously because we thought it was so funny. The other place we

might have seen it would be in a Charlie Chaplin film, anyway, because he made great fun of dictators. But the woman driving the car pulled over to the curb, and she got very stern with us and she said, “You are never, ever to make that gesture again.” You have to imagine what time this was. The war ended really in 1946. The war in Europe ended in ’45, so this was a mere four years after that; not enough time for anybody to catch their breath from all the atrocities that happened. When I got home, to my grandparents’ credit—because they were kind of passive racists and anti-Semites, you know, in that way that WASPs can be that way passively—but my grandmother talked to me and talked about what an evil man Hitler was, and that it wasn’t anything funny and I should never make that gesture again. So it impressed me very deeply.

01-00:12:33

And then a few years later, I had a friend; she became my best friend. She and I, we talked about religion a lot. We’d stand on the street corner between our houses and talk about God. We both agreed that it didn’t matter what religion you practiced, it was the same God, it was one and the same. She came with me to one of my Sunday school classes and I went with her to the Jewish Community Center, which she invited me to join and I wanted to join. Had a huge argument with my grandmother over that; she wouldn’t let me join. And in fact, that was one of the arguments that precipitated her saying that she couldn’t handle me. But this kid was quite wonderful and we shared a philosophical bent and an intellectual bent. And she—I believe it was she, because I can’t think who else it would have been—who told me that down at the bottom of the hill on the street where I lived, there was a girl who had been orphaned by the Holocaust, and her parents had been in a concentration camp. And I, for many years afterwards, dreamed about her. I dreamed that I went into the apartment buildings, looking at the apartment complex where she lived and looked for her, and I would knock on the door and tell her how sorry I was. But of course, I never did that.

01-00:14:10

Tewes: That’s interesting that stuck with you.

01-00:14:12

Griffin: Yes, it really did. A lot of my work has talked about and included the Holocaust, something that I’ve been—“interested” is not the right word—but I’ve been compelled by for much of my life.

01-00:14:36

Tewes: And was your adoptive family Jewish?

01-00:14:37

Griffin: Yes.

01-00:14:39

Tewes: Do—

01-00:14:39

Griffin: Yes, and I consider myself culturally mixed. In other words, I'm partly Jewish culturally. They weren't religious, of course. They were Marxists. [laughs]

01-00:14:50

Tewes: I'm wondering, yeah, if they saw any connection between politics and cultural identity for them. Or perhaps being Jewish and radical, they stood out in a way that others—

01-00:15:03

Griffin: Well—

01-00:15:03

Tewes: —might not.

01-00:15:05

Griffin: A lot of my friends—well, not all of them, but a great many of my friends in high school were Jewish. I'll tell you a funny story. A bunch of us went—and maybe I was not born Jewish and there was another kid who—young woman, who was not Jewish, but the rest of us were all Jewish—and we went Christmas caroling as a kind of something to do that would be giving to others. So we chose an old peoples' home. We thought they might like some high school kids caroling, so we went and we sang all these carols. They didn't join in and they didn't seem enthusiastic. They were kind of sweet with us and happy to see us, but that was about it. Later we found out it was a Jewish old peoples' home. [laughs]

01-00:16:01

Tewes: Oh, boy.

01-00:16:04

Griffin: But no, the Dimondsteins were not religious, but culturally Jewish. And I learned Yiddish, not—I'd love to actually be able to speak Yiddish, but I don't, but I know a lot of Yiddish words. I just picked it up from being in the household. We celebrated Passover and celebrated Hanukah. There was a great awareness of being Jewish there.

01-00:16:34

Tewes: A good education.

01-00:16:35

Griffin: Yeah. Yes, great education.

01-00:16:37

Tewes: Now you mentioned the impact of McCarthyism on your life, and you told me a story about the FBI visiting the Dimondsteins' home.

01-00:16:48

Griffin: Yes, yes. Once I was there, and I remember clearly because I was washing the dishes and I could look out the window and see these two guys in raincoats, trench coats at the door. And Red and Mort—those were their names—they

were out, and I was babysitting and washing up after dinner. So I went to the door, and they asked for the man of the house or whatever. I guess they asked for Morton, and I said, “Well, they’re not here,” but I knew who they were, just because it was perfectly obvious. They had these Stetson hats. I mean, who comes around, two men together, in trench coats and Stetson hats? Ridiculous. It was like out of a spy movie. [laughs] So later when the Dimondsteins came home, I said, “Well, the FBI was here. They didn’t announce themselves as the FBI, but I knew it.” They said, “How did you know?” I said, “How could I not know?”

01-00:17:48

And my boyfriend, there was another story, too. My boyfriend, who lived really just a block-and-a-half away, his mother and father had both been politically active. Sylvia [Richards], I believe, wasn’t in the party, but his father had been. His father, they had interrogated his father and put him on the blacklist, and so they had all the information about him. But then he was alcoholic, and he never paid any child support. Sylvia had two sons to support, so when they brought her in she gave information about him, not because she wanted to cooperate, but because she didn’t want to be blacklisted because she was the sole support for these two boys. So, my adoptive family wouldn’t speak to her, But my friends—and we were all politically radical and against McCarthyism—we loved Sylvia because she had joined the Civil Rights movement, she was active in all the causes of the day, and we understood her to be a really decent person. She hadn’t given any information that the FBI [didn’t] already have, but she was just protecting her [ability] to earn a living.

01-00:19:14

Years later, when I was at a conference with Tillie Olsen—do you know who she was? She was a radical. Her husband was a union organizer with the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union], and she was a wonderful writer who wrote—her most famous book is *Tell Me a Riddle*; beautiful, beautiful prose, short stories—and we were at this conference on women’s literature together, and somebody was attacking Mary Daly for not being politically correct on some sort of issue. I spent some time with Tillie that night and she said, “You know, during the McCarthy period”—and she was just absolutely progressive and loyal and brave—she said, “During the McCarthy period, people in the party or in the progressive movement would shun anybody who had given information, and,” she said, “I never did that. I didn’t believe in doing that.” This was in regard to Mary, because she was being kind of ostracized, and I thought that was very wise and very humane. It’s different when somebody is really sort of a spy and is being paid or is misrepresenting who they are. That’s a whole different question. But I think political correction can mask a kind of cruelty sometimes. I’m somebody who feels very strongly about—I’m a big fan of Black Lives Matter and of Me Too and all these movements, but I’m also a fan of empathy and mercy.

01-00:21:23

Tewes: That's good policy. Sounds like you had an early awakening, when it comes to politics.

01-00:21:33

Griffin: Yes, quite early.

01-00:21:33

Tewes: Did you engage in any political activity as a teenager?

01-00:21:37

Griffin: Yeah, I went on ban-the-bomb marches. I made a film, an eight-millimeter film—it's now in the Schlesinger Library if anybody wants to go see it; you'd have to get an old eight-millimeter projector—and it was a protest against capital punishment. Caryl Chessman was [a cause célèbre], you know, so there were marches to save his life; he was on death row. I went on civil rights marches. And I was a teenager when I came up to UC still. I was only seventeen.

01-00:22:23

Tewes: Yeah, you were young. Do you remember why you chose Berkeley?

01-00:22:29

Griffin: I actually wanted to go to Reed College. I applied to both Berkeley and Reed. My sister had gone to Berkeley, so it was a natural choice for me and I had a lot of friends going to Berkeley, but I wanted to go to Reed because of their sort of emphasis on a classical education, and I really aspired to that. They didn't give me a scholarship and UC gave me a scholarship, and I didn't have very much money, so that was important. Also, my grandmother was afraid that if I went to Reed College I would become a Communist. The FBI had come to visit her when I was living with the Dimondsteins, and she was worried about me being an I don't know what. [laughs]

01-00:23:17

Tewes: And then you go to Berkeley—

01-00:23:19

Griffin: Yeah, and then I, yeah—

01-00:23:20

Tewes: —engage in politics there.

01-00:23:21

Griffin: —sure that was going to be safer. Oh, Grandma, you got that one wrong. [laughs]

01-00:23:29

Tewes: So if I have this correct, you started in fall of 1960.

01-00:23:33

Griffin: Yeah.

01-00:23:37

Tewes: About how early did you join SLATE?

01-00:23:41

Griffin: Immediately.

01-00:23:43

Tewes: What was your connection there? How did you know to join?

01-00:23:45

Griffin: Well, my sister from my adoptive family, she was older and she was Mort's daughter from an earlier marriage, so she didn't live in the Dimondstein household but she was there often, and it was through her that I met the Dimondsteins. She went to UC. So did, I believe, Susie Steinberg; maybe she didn't. But one of my best friends in high school, Kate Coleman, went to UC. They were all members of SLATE, and I had met Mike Myerson. There was some political event in the summer, I believe, that Gerry ["Red" Dimondstein] took me to before they went to Italy the summer before I went to college. They were around for a while and they took me to this event, or somebody who knew the family took me to this event. It was about civil liberties, it was a panel on civil liberties, and I met Mike at that panel. So, I was prepared to join. And then I lived in Stebbins Hall, which was a co-op, and there were people in the co-op who belonged to SLATE, too. Georgia Siegel was one of them, and Julie [Julianne] Schwartz [Morris], I believe, lived in Stebbins.

01-00:25:20

Tewes: Were you interested in any other campus political group?

01-00:25:23

Griffin: No.

01-00:25:25

Tewes: SLATE was it, the whole way.

01-00:25:26

Griffin: Yeah, yeah. Well, at a certain point, I stopped being so active because I knew that what I wanted was to be a poet—I knew that by the time I was fourteen years old—a poet and a writer, and I didn't want my time taken up being an activist. I would join protests and that's where my sympathies lay, but I wanted to join a world that was more concerned with literature. When I moved for a summer, it was supposed to be just a summer, because I was on scholarship and ready to go into my last year at UC, but I moved over to live with some friends in North Beach. Again, they were red diaper babies: Nora Lapin, who's back in this area now; and Jamie Miller, who's died. We shared an apartment at Grant and Greenwich. It was really a hot spot in North Beach. Allen Ginsberg had lived there in the past, and I believe Denise lived there—Denise Levertov—at some point.

Anyway, I loved living in North Beach. That summer I studied improvisational theater at The Committee, which was directed by Mike

Myerson's brother, Alan. Mike was a major mover and shaker in SLATE, and his brother Alan was in theater. The Committee had been in LA and they moved up to San Francisco. So I got to know them and I studied improv there. I studied mime with the Mime Troupe when it was run by R.G. Davis. I was interested in writing plays, and that's why I was studying acting. I was writing poetry, and I met [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti, as many of us did who lived in the neighborhood. So, it was really as close to heaven as a young writer gets, and I just decided I was not going to go back to Cal, because if I went back I would become an academic, and that's not what I wanted to do with my life.

01-00:27:53

Tewes: So that's summer of '63 that you—

01-00:27:55

Griffin: Yes.

01-00:27:55

Tewes: —moved away, okay. All right. Well then, chronologically, we're moving backwards then, again, to talk more about SLATE.

01-00:28:04

Griffin: However, just one other thing. When I was on the UC campus, when I was studying there, I was a double major in English and history. But also, you could have said I was a triple major, because one of the most significant courses I took was a political science [honors] seminar with Hanna Pitkin, and that was marvelous. That was a wonderful education. Among the many books we read, we read [Albert] Camus, we read Hannah Arendt, who's been a major influence on me for all my life. Hanna was a marvelous teacher.

And F.J. was in that [class], Frank Bardacke. Are you interviewing him? He should be part of this. He had a stroke, apparently, recently, but he's recovering and you should interview him.

01-00:28:53

Tewes: Oh, that's good. Glad to hear. Well, I'm glad you mentioned poli sci, because I'm wondering: you were very much interested in politics, you were doing the active work, but were you thinking about where you fit in politically into political systems? Were you reading about Marxism and—

01-00:29:11

Griffin: Yeah, I was reading Marx, but I just found the economic theory, which is his major theory, *Das Kapital*, I just couldn't get through *Das Kapital*. I found it boring. I probably would find it more interesting now. It's interesting because as I developed my work as a feminist writer, one of my insights came through a disagreement with Marx. I think we're all standing on Marx's shoulders. It's not like I want to obliterate Marxism. I feel very grateful to Marx's work, but I'm not a Marxist. I'm not an anything-ist, because I believe in a sort of more—not such an obedient ideology, [laughs] not following one person's thought; just use everybody's thought. You think for yourself, but—

01-00:30:10

Tewes: Did you have an ideology in college?

01-00:30:15

Griffin: No, I was developing opinions and developing insights, but I didn't—although I guess I would have called myself a Marxist for a period then. But my argument with Marxism was, yes, Marx turned Hegel on his head, and that's my argument. In other words, he's doing the same thing Hegel was doing; he just turned it upside down. What Hegel did and what Marx did, too, was to divide spirit from matter and look at them as separate and place them in conflict, and they're not in conflict. They're two faces of the same reality, and that's what  $E=mc^2$  means.

01-00:30:57

Tewes: I like that.

01-00:31:00

Griffin: And my work, I mean, it was one of the insights that led me to *Woman and Nature: [The Roaring Inside Her]* is that woman is identified with matter. It's there even in the language: matter, *mater*. And so, the sense that women are more material is part of what drives misogyny. "Men are more spiritual." "Women are more material," except when it comes to going to church, and then women—but they follow the father; and they follow the father, the priest; and they follow God the father. And so, they're not leading the spirituality; they're obeying it.

01-00:31:42

Tewes: Interesting. I wanted to talk to you about this idea of the [lowest significant common denominator] in SLATE, and the idea that you can bring all these disparate, liberal, progressive, Marxist people together for common purpose. Did that appeal to you?

01-00:32:04

Griffin: Yes, it did. It did, although I was with the sort of more radical Marxist wing. We would sort of jockey for power within the organization and I was one of the people who jockeyed. I fought for that power, too. Today, I would be quite different. I would be more, not compromising, but more cooperating or trying to establish an atmosphere of listening to each other.

01-00:32:40

Tewes: Did you see that as a conflict at the time, that so many different people with different ideas were trying to achieve something?

01-00:32:48

Griffin: Well, it was a sort of a conflict for taking over the—at one point, there were these very attractive young men who sort of burst into the meeting and gave this almost like a stump speech, a political stump speech, and they were liberals and we opposed them. But really, I was kind of following the lead of these older guys and getting a political education from them, but not fully

understanding the issues yet, which was appropriate for my age. I was learning. There was all kinds of learning.

We went to the San Joaquin Valley in the back of a truck one day, and slept overnight there and got up at 6:00 in the morning to work in the fields so we could testify about the conditions that farm workers faced. So that's an education, to do that. One of the people on our truck—I just love this story. I tell it all the time. It's corny, but one of the guys on our truck was from Brooklyn, I think, somewhere in New York; I think it was one of the boroughs. Anyway, as we were driving out there, we were told we'd be picking strawberries and tomatoes, and he said, "Where are the tomato trees?" [laughs] Many of us were Californians; we were a little more rural than that. We knew that tomatoes don't grow on trees. [laughs]

01-00:34:30

Tewes:

Wow.

01-00:34:30

Griffin:

That was fun. He was getting an education, too. So it was all kinds of education.

And then the factions, the various factions. Like there were people who were Trotskyites and people who were liberals and people who were kind of Marxists. I was in the Marxist faction. I fought within the organization so that the Marxists would have more control. But I remember one time [when] I was [living] in the co-op and I was with one of my friends from SLATE who was in the co-op, [too], and she was a red diaper baby, and we were talking with a young person who was our age and at dinner, and she was arguing with us about the conditions, what was going on in the labor movement, or the attempt to organize it as it was still—César Chavez was just beginning to organize—and we were talking with her about the strikes and the importance of it, and she was really opposing what we were saying. But I was very patient with her, and my friend, she was outraged that anybody would have those opinions and didn't want me even talking with her. I was just very patient in trying to explain to her what was going on, and I actually got her to see things differently a little bit. So then my friend said, "Oh, I learned something from you about that." So I learned something from myself at that moment, I think. I had gone to summer camp with kids from the San Joaquin Valley, often the children of farmers, and so I had a sympathy with what they went through.

01-00:36:40

Tewes:

I want to get back to the farm worker and labor organizing there, but I'm really interested in this idea that you have to sell SLATE, almost like proselytizing to other students. Do you feel like that was the work you were doing in many ways?

01-00:36:55

Griffin:

Oh sure, sure, yeah. They ran me for an office, and I was supposed to be speaking against the Peace Corps, which is something I didn't really believe in. I didn't understand it. I guess the fear was that the Peace Corps was going to be like a cover for the CIA, which it was in some cases. But also, I married a man who had been in the Peace Corps, and he certainly wasn't CIA and he was doing very good work. It had a very good side, which was to acquaint young Americans with conditions all over the world that are different, and create empathy for other peoples and other ways of life. And so, they sent me to a big dormitory, and I just decided I couldn't bear to talk about the Peace Corps, so I talked about the First Amendment and got these huge cheers. There was a fellow driving me around to these places, and he hadn't come in. I guess he'd been in the car, and I came out and he said, "Well, what did you say?" because they gave me such cheers that he could hear it all the way out in the car. And I said, "I talked about the First Amendment." And so that was like a little glimpse of the future. So I wasn't at Cal during FSM [Free Speech Movement], but that was the issue that coalesced people. And of course it was the key issue when you're dealing with McCarthyism and HUAC, freedom of speech.

01-00:38:33

Tewes:

Mm-hm.

01-00:38:37

Griffin:

So I think my whole generation was feeling rebellious about this suffocating atmosphere of anti-Communism. And the irony is, I believe that the police state—which it really was; McCarthyism was like a police state—and that atmosphere actually kept United States and American radicals behind the times, because we couldn't talk about Stalin's crimes. We couldn't talk about the ways in which the Soviet Union was murdering people; violating people's rights; anti-Semitic [acts]; massacring other ethnic peoples; the massacres of farmers, peasants. We couldn't talk about that because anybody who had a socialist or a communist or a Marxist point of view was being so vilified that you had to—sort of like, which side are you on? You had to choose one side or the other. You couldn't look at other complexities in the picture, and so I think the whole American left got atrophied. It's changed now, and pretty much everybody understands how terrible Stalin was and how repressive the Soviet Union was even afterwards, but it took a while. Where I learned about those things, besides reading—I read, along with Susan Sontag, who became a friend at one point, and we both learned a lot from Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*—but I also learned it from being in Europe, and I imagine Sontag did, too, that European progressives I knew were far ahead of American progressives in being progressive and socialist and critical of the tyrannies in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.

01-00:40:53

Tewes:

So that kind of complexity didn't really exist in the American conversation.

- 01-00:40:57  
Griffin: Not enough. There were a few people thinking that way, but not enough, yeah.
- 01-00:41:05  
Tewes: So you mentioned you were running for office—
- 01-00:41:08  
Griffin: Oh yeah, it was—
- 01-00:41:08  
Tewes: Do you remember when this was?
- 01-00:41:10  
Griffin: I wasn't elected for it, but it was, well, it was probably my sophomore year. I really don't remember, yeah.
- 01-00:41:16  
Tewes: 'Sixty-one, '62?
- 01-00:41:17  
Griffin: 'Sixty-one, '62, yeah.
- 01-00:41:20  
Tewes: Do you remember anything else about that experience of running for office?
- 01-00:41:24  
Griffin: Well, it took a lot of courage to sort of all of a sudden stand up in the middle of the campus. You know, there's that tree that's in between Dwinelle [Hall] and, what's that other building where the big auditorium is? Anyway, in between those two big buildings there's this tree, and used to be—I hope it's still there—and to stand up on the surface that surrounds it, and stand up there and just give a stump speech—I guess that's where the word “stump” speech comes from—and that was interesting. But to have to represent an opinion that I didn't fully agree with was not anything I wanted ever to do again in my life.
- 01-00:42:31  
Tewes: Do you remember how you got the idea to run for office?
- 01-00:42:35  
Griffin: I was drafted.
- 01-00:42:38  
Tewes: By whom?
- 01-00:42:40  
Griffin: The organization, yeah.
- 01-00:42:42  
Tewes: Did anyone—

01-00:42:42

Griffin: The leadership.

01-00:42:44

Tewes: —say, “Susan” —

01-00:42:45

Griffin: We’d have these elections and elect these leaders. I might have offered; I don’t know that I did, though. I really can’t remember.

01-00:42:56

Tewes: That’s fascinating.

01-00:42:57

Griffin: Yeah. It’s not something that I was dying to do.

01-00:43:00

Tewes: So maybe you really were drafted. [laughs]

01-00:43:02

Griffin: Yeah. Reading poetry, speaking, I’m fine with that, I’m fine; I don’t have any fear with regard to that. But running for office is something completely different.

01-00:43:20

Tewes: Different beast, for sure. And I’m reminded that you were seventeen when you started at Berkeley, and basically seventeen, eighteen when you were really involved with SLATE. You were so young, and I’m wondering if you had any fear about being arrested or expelled from school, particularly—

01-00:43:39

Griffin: No. No, I wanted to be arrested. By the time I was living in San Francisco, I went, I joined the protest at the Sheraton Palace, and we sat in in front of the two main doors. There’s one on the side street and one on Market, and I sat in in front of the Market Street entrance. But they arrested everybody on the side street, probably because they didn’t want the arrests to be so visible as they would have been on Market. So, I didn’t get arrested and I was disappointed. [laughs]

01-00:44:21

Tewes: You didn’t get to join that.

01-00:44:22

Griffin: Yeah no, I wasn’t afraid at all. My only [regret] was I didn’t go South. I wish I’d had that experience. I didn’t go South to join the Freedom Riders because my grandparents were still my legal guardians, and I was afraid that they’d pull me out of Berkeley if I did that; probably would’ve. So, I felt I didn’t have the freedom, I wasn’t going to be allowed to do that because the legal guardianship passed back to them when my adoptive family—when the Dimondsteins went to Italy, which—and they lived there for four years and we were in close contact. But they weren’t my guardians anymore. So my

grandparents were, and they wouldn't have understood me going into the South and getting arrested for civil rights.

01-00:45:15

Tewes: Did they know about your political activity in general?

01-00:45:18

Griffin: They probably did, but I didn't share it with them; although when I would go home for Christmas or something, I'd wear my buttons very prominently.  
[laughs]

01-00:45:29

Tewes: That sounds about right.

01-00:45:30

Griffin: I need to use the—

01-00:45:30

Tewes: Okay, let's take a break.

01-00:45:32

Griffin: Yeah. [break in audio]

01-00:45:34

Tewes: Okay, we are back from a break, and we just finished talking about trying to get arrested at the Sheraton Palace. [laughs]

01-00:45:45

Griffin: Yeah, I mean, I've been arrested since then, but I was never arrested while I was in SLATE.

01-00:45:53

Tewes: Mm-hm. Well, that was in February, March of 1964, I believe. So you were already—

01-00:45:59

Griffin: I was already in San Francisco—

01-00:46:00

Tewes: —out of the loop.

01-00:46:01

Griffin: —then.

01-00:46:01

Tewes: Do you remember how you stayed in touch with SLATE members to learn about protests?

01-00:46:04

Griffin: Well, they were very good friends. It's like, in those days—and I imagine it's true, too, for these wonderful kids who are in the school shooting and they've gone around and been doing this great work for gun control, and I imagine

that these are friendships that they'll have for the rest of their lives. That's what it was like for us. I've remained friends with—they're not my closest friends, but I love them. I'll always love them, and I'll never lose touch with them. There are private parties and public events, and we've—sadly, were all together recently at the funeral of one our members, Herb Mills. I don't know if you know who he was.

01-00:46:54

Tewes: Yes.

01-00:46:55

Griffin: Did you get a chance to interview Herb?

01-00:46:57

Tewes: No, we did not, but he has been acknowledged in this process.

01-00:47:03

Griffin: Well, he's been documented a lot. He became a great ILWU leader.

01-00:47:12

Tewes: Well, that's actually a great segue to talk about the socializing and community-building aspect of SLATE.

01-00:47:20

Griffin: I'll tell you a very funny story. It's not a story I witnessed myself, but it's just a really fabulous story, which is, in the year before I came, SLATE raised money by having parties where we served beer and all kinds of other alcohol. I got very drunk once when I was the barmaid and I sampled everything, not realizing that this would have an accumulative effect. It was terrible. But anyway, there was this party and they ran out of beer. One of the members was on a motorcycle when he went with his friend and the two of them went to a liquor store and got a bunch of beer, and then it was going to be not easy to carry all this beer on the back of the motorcycle. But they were being followed by a couple of FBI agents, so they went over to the FBI agents and they said, "Here, you're going the same way. Take the beer," and the FBI agents did. [laughs]

01-00:48:34

Tewes: So they delivered the beer to the SLATE party.

01-00:48:35

Griffin: Yeah, because they were going there anyway. They were just following them everywhere. [laughs]

01-00:48:42

Tewes: Well, I'm glad that could be useful for you. Do you remember what the beer parties were raising money for specifically, or was it just the general SLATE fund?

01-00:48:54

Griffin:

I don't. It takes money to organize and run an organization and—but I really don't. I mean, they had elected me treasurer one year, which was probably a terrible mistake. I just don't have a head for figures and I don't—who knows even? I don't think I could have told you then what—how the finances worked.

01-00:49:22

Tewes:

Much less now, sixty years on.

01-00:49:24

Griffin:

Yeah, right.

01-00:49:26

Tewes:

Won't push you too much on that. So, it sounds like you were socializing with a lot of the SLATE people. You were in Stebbins Hall and doing all this work.

01-00:49:38

Griffin:

Oh yeah. And as I said, when we had a political action, we would be spending the whole day together. And then, even though I didn't go South, we had a whole committee providing support for the people who did go South. We had meetings all the time.

And we'd go to the movies together. We'd go and there was a great Mexican restaurant on Telegraph that we'd go to really a lot to eat. It was cheap and good. It was great history really. There was a wonderful theater. It was in the second block, I think, of Telegraph leading south from the campus. It was black on the outside, so very sort of Parisian looking. It issued a kind of program like you get from the museum now with a description of all the films that were showing. And guess who wrote the film notes? Guess who owned half the theater? Pauline Kael. That was before she was famous. But I got a whole education in the cinema going to that theater. We'd go during finals period and watch one film after another.

01-00:51:17

Tewes:

A great way to distract you from the studying.

01-00:51:21

Griffin:

Yeah. We just hung out and did everything together as a group. It was great. Kids do that now. Instead of going on personal dates, they go out in groups, but we did that then.

01-00:51:39

Tewes:

I want to ask you about your personal duties in SLATE. You mentioned you were treasurer for a while. Do you remember other specific activities you needed to do in order to help get the organization moving along?

01-00:51:53

Griffin:

I really don't. I remember lots of debates. We debated everything, as if we had the power to make major international decisions in our hands, which we didn't.

But we debated these issues with that kind of seriousness, which was wonderful, because, again, I learned so much. I remember some of the picket lines we were on. Well, of course, there were the classic things: putting on stamps, lots of addressing, addressing leaflets that we'd fold over and staple and put a stamp on and address. So there was lots of that, lots of mimeographing. There weren't Xerox machines then. It was very messy business. But speaking of technology, we had to master the mimeograph machine. And passing out leaflets, standing places and giving people leaflets. So there was that sort of humdrum stuff, but it was all fun because we were always together doing it.

01-00:53:09

Tewes: As you were passing out leaflets and talking to students on campus, do you remember getting hassled by other students or anyone in the administration?

01-00:53:17

Griffin: You know, really I never was, yeah. Was probably lucky that I wasn't, but I wasn't.

01-00:53:26

Tewes: That's good to hear.

01-00:53:27

Griffin: Yeah, despite the fact it was—and then it's still McCarthy. But I'll tell you one thing that happened that was terrible. There was a professor there; his name was Thomas Parkinson, he was my professor of English. I went in to ask him if he would sign a petition about banning the bomb, if he would be one of the sponsors. Maybe he was a sponsor of an action we were taking, I don't know, but he did agree to do that and did it publicly. About a month later, this man came on campus and he came into Tom's office, and Tom was there with his TA, and he killed the TA and shot Tom in the face. When the police apprehended him, they found in his briefcase a list of people that he had, and it was a list he'd gotten from the John Birch Society. Part of the reason Tom was on that list was because he'd signed this ban. So I felt a little bit responsible for that. It was terrible. Later, he and I were lovers. He had an open relationship with his wife, whom later I became friends with, but much later, much, much later, years later.

01-00:54:57

Tewes: So this affected you on several levels.

01-00:55:00

Griffin: On several levels, yeah.

01-00:55:03

Tewes: Was there anyone you felt you could talk to at that time?

01-00:55:06

Griffin: Oh yeah. I did talk to people about it, yeah.

01-00:55:14

Tewes: I'm sorry to hear; that's very tough. Well, that gets me to thinking about the loyalty oath, so how that reverberated on campus—

01-00:55:26

Griffin: They still—

01-00:55:27

Tewes: —even—

01-00:55:27

Griffin: —ask you to sign that bloody thing.

01-00:55:29

Tewes: Yes, I did, too.

01-00:55:31

Griffin: Even, I taught in OLLI, which is this Osher Lifelong Learning [Institute] for older people, and it's older people teaching older people, and they're asking us to sign this silly thing. I signed it, because, you know, what—it's just ridiculous.

01-00:55:49

Tewes: Did you hear stories about professors or grad students on campus who were concerned about their careers because of the politics in general, or the loyalty oath in particular?

01-00:56:00

Griffin: Yeah. It was kind of like what had happened in the Soviet Union where—there was a book that a Soviet writer wrote about, and in the central image of the title was sort of ice breaking up, the spring thaw, and it was a period like that on the UC campus, too. So a lot of the stories were about what had happened in the past, but there were things like that happening. There was so much resistance and rebellion going on, and they'd show this film. It was called *Operation* something—

01-00:56:41

Tewes: *Abolition*, I think.

01-00:56:42

Griffin: [*Operation*] *Abolition*, yeah. It was just a dreadful film, it was very shadowy. It was sort of like a very badly made film noir. And I love film noir, but this was like, ooh, like one of those films made by—who's that guy who made that film that [was] purposely bad? It was like that.

01-00:57:02

Tewes: Ed Wo—no, Ed Woods?

01-00:57:04

Griffin: Yeah, Ed Woods. It was like an Ed Woods film, but it was government. And Communist threat, just one of these voices that makes you frightened: “Watch out. Don’t open your door to strangers; it might be a Communist.” [laughs]

01-00:57:23

Tewes: And that was in the response to the May [1960] HUAC protests at City Hall.

01-00:57:27

Griffin: Yeah. So we went to one of the showings, and we were laughing and making fun of it, and nobody threw us out. Everybody was right along with us laughing.

01-00:57:41

Tewes: Interesting.

01-00:57:45

Griffin: It was really a period of—it was the sixties. It was the very beginning of the sixties before anybody had a name for it, before the hippies. It was the very beginning, and it was just a very different atmosphere. Somehow we were all snubbing our nose at McCarthy. I guess we were kids; we were unemployable anyway. I worked on campus as a cashier and a waitress in one of the restaurants; that’s the most employable I was, so who’s going to fire you from that for expressing your opinions? It was a real turn-around.

01-00:58:39

Tewes: I think you have a good point that these are young people just beginning, not concerned about paying the bills, necessarily.

01-00:58:46

Griffin: Yeah, and you could live on much less money then and there wasn’t this huge differential in income. That’s something that’s happened in my lifetime and it’s just awful to see it. When I was living in North Beach, you could live on practically nothing, and that allowed you to become a poet fulltime or a writer fulltime or an artist, and now it’s terrible.

01-00:59:24

Tewes: We’ve been kind of working our way to this, but I’m wondering what you learned about political organizing from your time in SLATE.

01-00:59:36

Griffin: That’s a good question. I learned a lot from Mike Miller, and I still learn from him. He’s still an organizer, a very accomplished one, and he’s written books about it now. But he had studied with Saul Alinsky, and Mike’s approach was: don’t tell people what to do, listen to them. And in fact, that was the approach that was—I wouldn’t say used, because there was nobody using it—but that we all employed to organize ourselves in the women’s movement. Consciousness-raising groups were all about telling the truth and listening to each other, and that’s how we began to be able to name and speak out about various women’s issues. There wasn’t even a term for sexual harassment—

nobody knew what that was—and that evolved out of women listening to each other and saying, “Oh, that happened to me, too,” and starting to discern the patterns and make sense of it, make a whole structure of meaning around it. This isn’t just an individual man demeaning me at work; this is a pattern which is keeping women down, oppressed, unemployed, keeping us from rising to leadership levels.

01-01:01:19

Tewes:

Yeah, I definitely want to talk more about the women’s movement as we get a little later on. So you mentioned you were at the 1964 Sheraton Palace protests, and then you also mentioned you went to the San Joaquin Valley to work—did you work in the fields or were you observing workers?

01-01:01:40

Griffin:

I worked in the fields, not too long. I didn’t have much of a taste for it. It was very, very hard work, very hard, and it was very hot. And so I worked for a while, and then friend and I left, went in search of water or something. It was awful. They didn’t give you bathrooms or water, anything. So then we were there so that we could witness that and testify. Later, I did appear before, I think it was a congressional hearing that was held in California, and testified.

01-01:02:20

Tewes:

Does the Cobey Committee [of the California State Senate] sound familiar to you? Could that possibly have been it?

01-01:02:24

Griffin:

Could have been it. Probably was, yeah.

01-01:02:26

Tewes:

Okay. So I think that was around 1961, so that fits in your timeline. Okay. It was interesting that when you were starting school as a freshman, and fall of 1960 is also the lead-up to the election of JFK.

01-01:02:47

Griffin:

Kennedy.

01-01:02:49

Tewes:

Did you have an opinion on candidates at that time or the presidential election?

01-01:02:55

Griffin:

Well, the Marxist guys I knew were very critical of Kennedy, and he wasn’t that far left but he was very liberal. I remember watching—remember I stayed overnight in LA with Julie [Julianne] Morris, who has a different name now because she has a married name, but I’m sure you’re interviewing her—

01-01:03:24

Tewes:

Yes, I am.

01-01:03:25

Griffin: —and we were both kind of thrilled. He was so good looking, and we liked him a lot.

01-01:03:39

Tewes: So you went to LA specifically to see him speak?

01-01:03:41

Griffin: No, no, we went to LA just to be in LA, but we were watching it on television, yeah, together. So I sort of remember that and feeling like, Well, this isn't the official position, but we like him a lot. [laughs] And then I remember very clearly when he was shot. That was horrible, when he was assassinated.

01-01:04:04

Tewes: Do you remember where you were?

01-01:04:05

Griffin: Yeah. I was on the San Francisco State campus, and I had gone into the, whatever it was, the school medical facility. It wasn't a hospital, but it was just where you went and had normal doctors' appointments. I don't know what I went in for. Everybody was listening to the radio, and I [asked], "What is going on?" and somebody told me. And that's when shortly thereafter, as I was listening, they pronounced him dead. It was just shattering. He had established a sort of feeling of hope and youthfulness, and suddenly that just vanished.

01-01:04:59

Tewes: I'm interested in that because SLATE, actually, when he came to speak at Berkeley in 1962, had a protest against—

01-01:05:07

Griffin: Well see, that—

01-01:05:07

Tewes: —his position.

01-01:05:08

Griffin: —there's the thing, you see? Julie and I felt sort of guilty, but we really did like him. [laughs]

01-01:05:14

Tewes: You weren't quite in step with—

01-01:05:16

Griffin: No, no. I mean, I was and I wasn't. It's like, I understood the complaints against him, but he was such an improvement and he was just very charming. I think that he truly—he made such a mistake with the Bay of Pigs, and I think he realized that, and I think he wanted to withdraw from Vietnam. So, he was like a bridge to something different. The atmosphere he established allowed us to move for something different.

And then his brother, Bobby, really became much more liberal. I saw his assassination on television late at night—I was pregnant—and that was shattering. That was terrible, because I thought there was a lot of hope in his candidacy. I think maybe I was backing [George] McGovern, but wasn't he running? Wasn't that the election? I can't remember.

01-01:06:43

Tewes:

Yes.

01-01:06:44

Griffin:

Yeah. I also felt that Bobby would probably win, and I liked him really a lot. But in elections, I'm really probably a little bit more strategic. I'm not centrist at all. I'm not centrist, but I am very progressive, but I'm strategic in elections. So, while I voted for Bernie [Sanders], I refused to attack Hillary [Clinton] during the primary and defended her actually during the primary, and then campaigned for her during the election, because I was afraid of the outcome that in fact occurred. I do feel that one faction of progressives is not strategic enough in elections. I don't think elections should be used as an advertisement for the far left. I think we have to form united fronts. That's how in France they defeated—

01-01:08:06

Tewes:

[Marine] Le Pen?

01-01:08:07

Griffin:

—Le Pen, yes. And to think that it can't happen here is really naïve. We have all the elements here of fascism and proto-fascism. We also have a strong tradition of democracy, but Germany did, too. Germany had years of a democracy, and with the right manipulation—I mean, that's why it's so terribly important not to let [Donald] Trump get away with what he's done with siding with the Russians. It's true the United States has sided with all kinds of dictators; that's not the point. The point is that he's breaking—he's violating the rules of democratic elections, that he was allowing a foreign country to subvert democratic elections. I'm not against Russia, although I have absolutely not an iota of fondness for [Vladimir] Putin, but I'm not against Russia so much as for democracy and for defending democracy. So I think it's terribly important that Trump's crimes be revealed and that he be removed from office for them. I think many, many people have come to feel like we must elect a president from the Democratic Party, even if you have to compromise your own views somewhat to get someone electable. I don't think we do have to compromise them all that much at this point, but the primaries will figure that out, I guess.

01-01:09:59

Tewes:

That's interesting, because that coalition-building to me reminds me of SLATE's.

01-01:10:03

Griffin:

Yes, that's right. That was the thinking behind that, yeah.

01-01:10:09

Tewes: It all comes around. You guys were on to something.

01-01:10:12

Griffin: Yeah, I think it's so important to be able to voice what you really believe in and not compromise that, but to form a coalition with others in achieving maybe not everything you want, but much of what you want. To ask for everything and no compromise is—not only is it unrealistic, it's irresponsible towards people who are dependent on the outcome, for their lives.

01-01:10:55

Tewes: That makes a lot of sense. In June 1961, SLATE was officially banned from campus. Do you remember that at all or how it affected the group?

01-01:11:14

Griffin: Isn't that amazing? I don't remember it. One of our largest demonstrations was when [Carl] Braden came to speak. And that, again, was a kind of harbinger of things to come, because it was around freedom of speech that we had huge numbers of people come out. He had been branded a Communist because he was one of the white Southerners who was supporting the Civil Rights movement in the South. And he and Anne Braden, they were both very, very brave, outspoken Southerners against racism. Maybe he was a socialist, I don't know. He wasn't a member of the Communist Party, but he was branded that, and so the administration wasn't going to let him speak. I can't remember how that came out. I think maybe he did speak in the end, I just don't know. I hope that history is somewhere.

01-01:12:15

Tewes: Nice. I think he did; don't quote me on that. Well actually, that makes me think. You mentioned when you were running for office on campus that free speech was your main thrust—

01-01:12:33

Griffin: Well, it wasn't my main thrust. I wish it had been. I was supposed to talk about—

01-01:12:39

Tewes: The Peace Corps.

01-01:12:40

Griffin: —Peace Corps, and I wasn't enthusiastic about that. I might have been elected had I talked about free speech all the time, but then I didn't really want to be elected.

01-01:12:53

Tewes: So it worked out, I guess.

01-01:12:54

Griffin: It worked out fine.

01-01:12:57

Tewes:

Well, I ask because SLATE had a lot of issues about which the group was very passionate, and I was wondering if there were any issues that you felt especially drawn to, that, yes, you definitely wanted to go to that protest or be involved in that march.

01-01:13:12

Griffin:

Well, civil rights, I felt very passionate about that. And after I worked in the fields, I was passionate about farm workers' rights, and the rest of my life was passionate about that. Free speech was a major passion of mine.

01-01:13:40

Tewes:

I think you mentioned you picketed Woolworth's at some time?

01-01:13:45

Griffin:

Yes, right, because Woolworth's had a nationwide chain, and they were not letting African American people sit at the lunch counter.

01-01:13:56

Tewes:

In Berkeley or in the South?

01-01:13:57

Griffin:

In the South, yeah. So we picketed their chain in the North, or here.

01-01:14:04

Tewes:

What did that entail?

01-01:14:06

Griffin:

Get a picket sign and walk around in a circle in front of the store.

01-01:14:10

Tewes:

So you were outside—

01-01:14:11

Griffin:

Yeah.

01-01:14:12

Tewes:

—drawing attention.

01-01:14:13

Griffin:

Yeah. I don't think they had a lunch counter up here. I don't remember that. Anyway, what would be the point? They weren't discriminating.

01-01:14:25

Tewes:

It'll be very symbolic, I suppose.

01-01:14:30

Griffin:

But we did picket, hand out leaflets, and you have signs.

01-01:14:40

Tewes:

Do you remember how the community responded to picketing and other protests you were doing?

- 01-01:14:52  
Griffin: No, I don't. I don't remember anything negative. Yeah, I can't tell you much about that.
- 01-01:15:00  
Tewes: Okay, that's fine. Just trying to get a sense of what the Bay Area was doing around you.
- 01-01:15:05  
Griffin: Well, it's interesting. Berkeley was very—itsself, the city government—was very conservative, if not right wing, so it was so different than it is now. But the student body was much more liberal, and the feeling, just the cultural feeling was much more liberal. San Francisco, I think, might have been more liberal than the Berkeley government, but I don't remember. I can't even tell you who was mayor then. Willie Brown shortly thereafter became mayor, but before that I don't know.
- 01-01:15:47  
Tewes: It's on the tip of my tongue. I know who it is.
- 01-01:15:50  
Griffin: You do, right.
- 01-01:15:51  
Tewes: Oh, [John F.] Shelley.
- 01-01:15:52  
Griffin: Shelley, that's right, Shelley, of course. Yeah.
- 01-01:16:01  
Tewes: Supposedly he had a big hand in helping with the Sheraton Palace negotiations.
- 01-01:16:06  
Griffin: Really? Wow.
- 01-01:16:08  
Tewes: But, what I've heard is the pressure came from the demonstrations that was happening and causing a lot of hoopla.
- 01-01:16:16  
Griffin: Yeah, that's what made it happen. So, what time is it?
- 01-01:16:25  
Tewes: Oh! It is—hold on, let's pause. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break. I want to talk to you about gender relations in SLATE. What was it like being a woman in this organization?
- 01-01:16:41  
Griffin: Well, I felt really loved by everybody, both the men and the women, but there was a definite discrimination against you if you were a woman. Even though I

was still learning so much, I was pretty articulate at that age. And yet, when I ran to be a representative, as opposed to treasurer or secretary—the representatives are the ones who sat in on the meetings that would decide what direction we would take. We'd have a general debate about it, but then the strategies were worked out through the representatives that were elected. They wouldn't elect a girl to that position, and the women were quite aware. We knew that and it angered us, but what could we do?

I remember a few years later—it was after I'd been in San Francisco; I think maybe I was already married, I don't know—but it was a meeting at Susan and Ronnie Grossman's house. I can remember it. I later lived in the same house. We rented it; they moved out and I rented it with my husband. But at that point, I wasn't living there. But I went to this meeting, and it was women who had been in SLATE, who were all—had been at different times—members of SLATE. We were recounting how there was this prejudice against us and we were never allowed to have leadership positions. And husbands and boyfriends and guys from SLATE showed up at this meeting and started making fun of us and broke the meeting up. They thought that was the end of the story. Little did they know, [laughs] that was just the beginning of the story.

01-01:18:57

Tewes:

Yes, because in 1984, at the reunion, this came up again, the discussion about women having been left out.

01-01:19:05

Griffin:

Yes. I guess so. I wasn't at that reunion. This was before the women's liberation movement really got started, this meeting that I'm talking about. So then, they maybe succeeded in breaking up this meeting, but not the movement.

01-01:19:29

Tewes:

I like that. So, you were very much aware that this was happening when you were involved in SLATE in the sixties.

01-01:19:35

Griffin:

Oh yes, very aware. I think it's an interesting thing that when you get to a certain age you become aware of prejudice against women, because you're out of the classroom, most of the time. Occasionally, there used to be terribly misogynist teachers, but by the time I went to college, I didn't encounter any teachers who I felt were prejudiced against me because I was a woman. They always kind of appreciated my comments and my participation. I was used to that, I was used to being treated with great respect and included in the dialogue.

Then when I started to work, when I went into the workforce—I did encounter that prejudice in SLATE, but it wasn't my ambition to become a political leader anyway, so it didn't affect me—but then when I went to work a few

years later at *Ramparts* [magazine], I encountered serious prejudice, in the sense that I came on as a kind of copyeditor's assistant, a proofreader, and that was going to be it. I'd watch as a young man would be brought in to be a staff writer, and there was no chance that I was going to be a staff writer, even though the guys would come to me and ask me to rewrite their work. They knew I could write, and I was a writer on the Sunday *Ramparts* newspaper, which was published for a period when there was a strike at the [*San Francisco*] *Examiner*, but that was as far as it went. When my generation reached the age at which we held jobs and we were married and had domestic work, that's when the women's movement got started, because we were facing the reality of our society and its prejudice against women. We didn't encounter that in our college classrooms so much. In law school, people must have encountered it, in med school, but not in undergraduate classes.

01-01:22:20

Tewes:

That makes sense, I think. You're right that when you reach that stage in your life, you become aware of those issues that affect you in different ways.

01-01:22:28

Griffin:

Yeah, because it affects your salary, it affects what kind of work you're going to be able to do, how far you can advance, yeah, everything.

01-01:22:42

Tewes:

So you mentioned that you haven't gone to any official SLATE reunions, but you've kept in touch with everyone over the years.

01-01:22:50

Griffin:

I've gone to private parties.

01-01:22:52

Tewes:

Private parties. Well, let's jump a little bit to speaking more about *Ramparts*. You said you were starting to be involved in the women's movement [while working there]. How did that take shape for you?

01-01:23:13

Griffin:

Well, I was aware that there was a group of women who were meeting at Anne Weills's house—Anne was married to Bob Scheer, [the editor of *Ramparts*]—and it was one of the first consciousness-raising groups that I know of in California. Maybe there were a few in New York, or one or two. And so, I was interested in going and I expressed that interest and I was invited, and that was the beginning of it for me. It was an astonishing experience. I became aware of my own prejudice against women, because when we'd have parties at *Ramparts*, I would hang out with the guys. I didn't want to be with the wives. I just assumed they were going to be, I don't know, talking about things that bored me. I found out that they were brilliant women, once I got into a room with them and we were talking with each other.

01-01:24:19

Tewes:

That's very interesting, confronting that in yourself. Do you remember what the women's movement looked like in the Bay Area, as compared to the national conversation?

01-01:24:34

Griffin:

I don't know. I was in it, so I wasn't looking at it from the outside. I was in it, and I don't think we compared ourselves to movements elsewhere, so I wasn't thinking that way. Again, there were a lot of deep friendships that went through the movement.

And then also, my marriage ended, and I wanted to explore my sexuality, too. I came to feel like I was either lesbian or bisexual, and had begun to have affairs with women. So, that was also going on in my life. The end of my marriage was very difficult for me, but it was untenable to remain in a marriage when my husband—who's now a friend and he's a lovely guy—but he was really resistant to change. He liked things the way they were, with me doing all the domestic work and—

01-01:26:00

Tewes:

Ah. So it coincided with something that was resonating with you personally.

01-01:26:05

Griffin:

Yes, oh yeah, absolutely, yes. Yeah.

01-01:26:15

Tewes:

I'm wondering if women you encountered in the women's movement also had backgrounds in civil rights or free speech like you did.

01-01:26:23

Griffin:

It's interesting because some did and some didn't, but a lot of the leaders in the first wave had that background. Robin Morgan, for instance, came out of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. And Anne Weills, of course, being married to Scheer. And so a lot of us had that background. But then more and more women came into it who did not have a [progressive] background, did not have any of that experience.

01-01:26:55

Tewes:

Do you think that impacted your approach to the women's movement?

01-01:26:58

Griffin:

Having had that background? Oh, of course, yeah, because we knew all about pickets and we knew how to lick envelopes, [laughs] we knew how to sit in, we knew how to do all that stuff, and we knew how to articulate political points of view. And I had been very, very deeply impressed and educated by civil rights literature, and particularly James Baldwin. I read *The Fire Next Time* when I believe it first came out in the *New Yorker*, and it was just seared into me. And a lot of the language, a lot of the understanding—there's a reciprocal relationship between language and understanding. When you have

the words for it, you can understand it better. If you understand it better, you can create the word for it.

We were given a leg up in the women's movement because those of us who had been active in civil rights and been educated in civil rights understandings could recognize something called, for instance, internalization. That was a concept that was developed in the Civil Rights Movement for people who internalized—African American people or people of color who had internalized the racist ideas and felt shame and felt a sense of inferiority internally from having taken in racist attitudes. And we realized, those of us who had been active in civil rights, we realized that that was also going on with women: that many women internalized misogyny and had that not only towards other women but towards ourselves, that we believed ourselves to be inferior or stupid. Well, that was my internalization towards the wives of *Ramparts*, same thing.

01-01:29:00

Tewes:

Yeah, I'm very interested in how those ideas continue or change over the years. I think that's a great example. Well, how do you think your involvement in SLATE has carried through the rest of your life, or has it?

01-01:29:18

Griffin:

Yeah, it definitely has. I got a political education. I got a great political education in the seminar with Hanna Pitkin, but also in my political work with SLATE. And I was never—well, I was quite active as a feminist for a period, but I would always go back. I would always retreat from—have always retreated from being an activist to a writer because I feel that's my main work in the world. But being an activist, I think, helps to clarify your thinking if you're going to be a political thinker. Otherwise, you can sort of ruminate all day long in the abstract and not understand how things get done and what the effect is on people's real lives. And so, I think it's been fortuitous and very good for me that I had that experience, both in the women's movement and earlier in SLATE.

01-01:30:26

Tewes:

Skipping ahead many years, I know, you'd told me that you actually protested against the Iraq War.

01-01:30:31

Griffin:

Oh yes, I was arrested. There was a women's movement organized by Code Pink. Code Pink came out of an organization called Unreasonable Women for the Earth. That title came from, well, originally Shaw, George Bernard Shaw: "A reasonable man adjusts to unfortunate circumstances; an unreasonable man fights them or protests against them and changes them." So, Diane Wilson is a shrimp boater. She was one of the few women who had her own shrimp boat and caught shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico, and the shrimp population was declining so radically it was hard for her and other shrimp boaters to earn a living. And in protest, she ran her boat into the chemical outlet, I think it was

of Alcoa or one of the big corporations that were spewing pollutants into the Gulf. She's done a number of protests. She sometimes just does it all on her own, climbing up on a tower and being there for days at a time. So, she was part of this Unreasonable Women for the Earth. We took the title from her because she, in an address she gave to the Bioneers one year, she said, "A reasonable woman adjusts to circumstances; an unreasonable woman changes them." And Code Pink came out of that.

Many things came out of it. Pramila Jayapal was at that first meeting, our congresswoman from Seattle. And Code Pink, which was really run by Jodie Evans, Medea Benjamin, who were both at that first meeting—and so Jodie asked me if I would rustle up a bunch of women writers to come, so I called my friends Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Terry Tempest Williams, and there were others—forgive me if I'm not remembering your name if you were there. But anyway, we, at the end of this march in Washington, D.C., we were asked if we would cross the police lines and go up and stand in front of the White House. The police were keeping us out of the park. I forget the name of the park, but it was the park in front of the White House, [Lafayette Park], and they were keeping us out. So, we crossed the police lines very easily. There was hardly any resistance. In fact, some of them asked us for peace buttons, for our buttons. [laughs] Anyway so, I got arrested protesting what was being threatened as a war on Iraq, and which occurred later. But I'm hoping that maybe we had some effect to stop the carpet bombing of Baghdad, because they didn't attack Baghdad as viciously as they had said they were going to.

01-01:33:54

Tewes:

So you finally got arrested.

01-01:33:56

Griffin:

Well, we stood and we were singing songs together and swaying back and forth. It was just kind of sweet sing-song, "Give Peace a Chance" and all. And meanwhile these police forces were kind of—men on top of the White House were aiming their guns at us. And then these different police forces—there's about three or four different police forces that guard the White House, and probably state, federal, D.C. police—and wouldn't be state, but D.C. police, and federal police, and then the park police. So, all three of them came, and consecutively, not all at once. The first one phalanx of them and they're looking very tough and grim, and helmets and everything and billy clubs, and they say, "Well, if you don't break up, we're going to arrest you. We're giving you five minutes." And they would stand there and we were swaying, singing "Give Peace a Chance," and five minutes would go by, and suddenly we looked up and they had all gone and we were still there. So that happened with another police force, and same thing. We're swaying. It took quite a long time; it took hours for us to finally get arrested. We're singing "Give Peace a Chance," and then this second police force left, and finally the third police force came. Same threat: "If you don't leave in five minutes, we're going

to”—they were there for a long time. But finally, I believe it was Max touched the fence, and you can’t. You’re not allowed to touch the White House fence, so they decided they had to arrest us. So, they took us very politely, one by one, into police vans, and that was it. Booked us down at that police station. It took hours. I was starving.

01-01:35:52

Tewes:

You told me to remind you, you wanted to speak about Angela Davis.

01-01:35:55

Griffin:

Yeah, Angela was on the radio recently, and I think it was a talk she gave somewhere and they recorded it. She was talking about joy, that joy is a very important element of every political movement; if it’s going to be successful, you have to have this sort of glue of, I would add love between each other, and joy.

This protest was very joyous, and then Max and I went out for a very nice meal afterwards. It was late, but we were starving. These parties that we would have, the SLATE parties, and just going to the movies or having dinners together, it’s very important. There’s a wonderful movie, which was one we all saw when we were kids back in the sixties, and it was called *Salt of the Earth*. It was made by one of the blacklisted directors, and it was about a union movement in the Southwest, miners, I believe. It showed this kind of big party where they’re all sharing food and singing, and that was a major scene in the movie, was sort of what they call solidarity and friendship and supporting each other, and you have to have that.

I think one of the things I really like about these kids who are protesting guns is that they go to places physically, it’s not all online. I must get thirty or forty emails a day from various online groups, and they’re all raising money and I don’t have any money right now, so what do I do? I just have to erase them. We need far more political actions in which people are physically in the same space. And Occupy Wall Street was very successful because they were in a space that symbolically meant something, and they were there together, and you could go and join them, which I did for one day.

01-01:38:18

Tewes:

Was that in San Francisco?

01-01:38:19

Griffin:

No, I did it in New York.

01-01:38:20

Tewes:

In New York, okay. I know there were pockets around the country.

01-01:38:24

Griffin:

Yeah, there was one in Oakland, yeah.

01-01:38:31

Tewes: Sadly, we are not going to do justice to your career that occurred after you finished all your work in SLATE, but I did want to just touch on the fact that I believe you returned to Berkeley for your MA?

01-01:38:43

Griffin: No, I went to San Francisco State for my MA.

01-01:38:46

Tewes: Okay. Okay then, I made that up. I'm glad you, [laughs] glad you can set me straight there. Very briefly, I wonder if you could just tell me about *Woman and Nature*, which came out in 1978, and maybe how that connects to the political awakening you'd had, as well.

01-01:39:08

Griffin: Yeah. Well, I think that my political activism made me into a political thinker, and I was looking at the ecology movement in a particular way and through the lens of being a woman. I was invited to speak, in the early days of the feminist movement, on the [UC Berkeley] campus in the Department of Agriculture about feminism and ecology. So at that time, I said I was an activist in the feminist movement but not in the ecological movement, so I couldn't speak about ecology as an activist, but I could speak philosophically. That was the sort of beginning, that speech.

Because one of the things that was going on was that the ecology movement was organized around getting people to recycle household goods and you're also supposed to ride a bicycle. And then I had a toddler to take care of, so how are you going to do all those things? I was arguing with a guy who was very—he wasn't typical of the men I knew in the ecology movement. He was very obnoxious, he was very bossy and he thought I should find a way to do all of that.

01-01:40:31

So, I was using my anger from what I felt was his abusive treatment of me, just verbally abusive. I spoke about how women have been blamed for centuries in Western culture for the problems of culture and we've become the scapegoat, as in Eve: Eve having brought death into the world, which was Christian theology introduced in the thirteenth century. I began *Woman and Nature* with that. And then it was also this connection between matter and mother, and the idea that matter is separate from spirit. That was a central concept for me in the book: the association of woman with matter and, of course, woman with nature. But it's a kind of also denigration of the flesh, denigration of physical life, denigration of natural life, and the failure to see that we participate in nature. So all of those things were thoughts that I had in that period.

I'm also a lover of poetry, of course, and I'm a poet, and I was very influenced by a form known as prose poetry, French prose poetry. Now many

people practice it, but then not many people were doing it in English. But I wanted to use that form, which I did. Many people don't recognize the form, but that's what it is in *Woman and Nature*.

01-01:42:26

Tewes: Had the term "ecofeminism" been around?

01-01:42:28

Griffin: No. There was a French thinker, and she wasn't translated, and you couldn't find books on the Internet then because there was no Internet, so none of us had a copy. Nobody I knew had a copy of the book, but we had heard about it. Her name was Françoise d'Eaubonne, and she'd written a book called *Écoféminisme ou mort, Ecofeminism or Death*, and there it is. It's even more relevant [now] than it was [then]. So, that term existed, but not a lot of people knew about it.

01-01:43:17

Tewes: Got it.

01-01:43:18

Griffin: I did, though.

01-01:43:20

Tewes: And certainly brought that into play.

01-01:43:21

Griffin: But I didn't know about it before I started *Woman and Nature*, however. I learned about it about halfway through. Somebody told me about it because [she] knew what I was doing.

01-01:43:32

Tewes: How funny that you're developing these ideas—

01-01:43:35

Griffin: Yeah—

01-01:43:35

Tewes: —simultaneously.

01-01:43:35

Griffin: —at the same time. That happens really often. If you look at the history of ideas, that happens frequently. At the same time that I was working, Carolyn Merchant was working on her book, *The Death of Nature*, and we exchanged some research and exchanged some ideas and supported each other. It gave me a lot of courage to know that she was working along the same lines, too. Very different books, but really supportive of each other in their conclusions and perceptions.

01-01:44:23

Tewes: I also want to touch briefly on the fact that you wrote the script, I believe, for the documentary, *Berkeley in the Sixties*?

01-01:44:30

Griffin:

Yes, I wrote it along with Stephen Most. And writing a script, as opposed to a screenplay [that] maps out what will happen, creates the action; but a script is done after the editing and the film is already pieced together, and you're writing the text for the voiceover. It's also my voice. I read the voiceover.

01-01:45:02

Tewes:

Which is a fun trivia question. [laughs]

01-01:45:04

Griffin:

That was a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun doing that. Mark would say, "Well, read it—I want you to read it with this slant," so I'd do that. It's like acting.

01-01:45:17

Tewes:

Had you done voiceovers for your books or anything before that?

01-01:45:19

Griffin:

No, I'd never done that, no. So, I loved it. It was fun.

01-01:45:25

Tewes:

Well I'm interested: in creating a documentary, I'm wondering what the misconceptions about Berkeley in the sixties were.

01-01:45:32

Griffin:

Well, Mark did a good thing in that he invited people who had been in Berkeley in the sixties to put in our two cents about the film. And one disagreement we had with him, we would have liked there to be much more about civil rights than he put in the film. He did put some footage about civil rights, and it was because those of us who were in the movement insisted on that.

01-01:46:06

Tewes:

Was the emphasis on, like, People's Park and Free Speech Movement then?

01-01:46:12

Griffin:

Well no, it was more on the Free Speech Movement and fighting HUAC, yeah.

01-01:46:23

Tewes:

Which is a good transition, too, as we wrap up here today: I'm wondering what kind of legacy SLATE leaves in relation to Free Speech Movement and Students for a Democratic Society.

01-01:46:38

Griffin:

What? I didn't hear the words. Legacies—

01-01:46:40

Tewes:

It leaves in relation to FSM and—

01-01:46:43

Griffin:

What leaves?

01-01:46:44

Tewes: SLATE.

01-01:46:45

Griffin: Oh, SLATE leaves, SLATE leaves. Well, I think FSM is one of its legacies, definitely, and the sort of memorials to FSM are important, reminding students. The students went through a period of being a lot less radical for years on the UC campus, but now I think that radicalism and progressive causes are back among young people, which is great to see. So, I think that's the legacy. That's not my area of thought or expertise, so it's hard for me to really answer that. It's a nice question, but I don't think I'm the person to answer it.

01-01:47:43

Tewes: That's no problem.

01-01:47:45

Griffin: Although I would say that the women's movement is part of the legacy. The guys may not have known it, but they were training feminist activists in all that period. [laughs]

01-01:48:11

Tewes: What kind of impact do you think SLATE has had on you personally?

01-01:48:20

Griffin: I think it's given me an inner strength that I'm not sure I could have gotten in any other way. Having progressive views—I am a Democratic Socialist, I would say. I mean, I think that democratic socialism will not solve all our problems because ecology and building local infrastructure and local community is terribly important, and that's not necessarily a concept that comes automatically in democratic socialism. I love the Green New Deal, but also emphasizing local governance, understanding of your own watershed, building community are really terribly important to changing the world in the way that it needs to be changed. And what was your question?

01-01:49:30

Tewes: How SLATE has impacted you.

01-01:49:32

Griffin: Well, it gave me a sense of strength and authority, I think, that—here we were, these kids hardly out of the highchair debating the major issues of our day, and taking ourselves quite seriously, and being taken seriously by each other and eventually by the university itself. That's a marvelous experience to have, and it builds up your sense of inner authority, that you have the right to speak about these issues. Not only do you have the right, you have the responsibility to speak about them. I'm already writing two things and have hardly enough time for those, because I'm having financial problems, but one thing I would love to write would be a sort of handbook about why we need democracy, and why you as a citizen need to speak up and speak your piece, and try to understand the issues deeply. So, I was given that. I was given that education

in action, not just theoretically, but I was given a place to practice that, and build up the skills for articulating positions and disseminating ideas, and I'm very grateful for that.

01-01:51:17

Tewes: And, what kind of legacy would you like to leave?

01-01:51:28

Griffin: Well, I'd like to leave a legacy in which the spirit of my work affects people. Of course, like every author, I'd like to still be read in a hundred years, but more than that, I'd like the earth to still exist in a hundred years in a way that nourishes all kinds of life. And I'd like the spirit in which I wrote what I wrote to be carried on in different ways.

01-01:52:10

Tewes: That sounds valuable. Is there anything you'd like to add about SLATE or yourself? I know we didn't get into too much of the later years.

01-01:52:23

Griffin: No, I really can't, I can't think of anything. I'll probably think of things as soon as you leave.

01-01:52:32

Tewes: Well, we can talk about that later then. Thank you so much for your time.

01-01:52:35

Griffin: Yeah, you're welcome.

[End of Interview]