

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

Interview Transcript 28

2015.001

Interviewee:	Karl Small
Interviewers:	Gary Kinsman
Collection:	Montreal, Quebec
Date:	March 23, 2015

23 March 2015

Persons present: Karl Small – KS
Gary Kinsman – GK
Chris Hurl - CH

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

GK: This is an interview with Karl Small, taking place on March 23, 2015 in Montreal. The question we start off our interviews with is do you have any memory of when you first heard about AIDS?

KS: I have two memories. One is my best friend in high school, who was straight, asking... In high school we had a “Morals” class in Quebec – either you took Morals or Religion – and Morals at my high school was actually super- super- super-liberal. So, there was lots of talk about drugs and sex and all of this kind of thing. And my friend asked a question about how AIDS was transmitted and everyone laughed, because it was a “Gay Disease” kind of thing – although the teacher didn’t laugh and tried to be cool and appropriate.

My other memory is around that time too, when I was in high school. I went to Toronto for a party and I ended up staying at the house of this girl who I had a crush on and who I’d made out a bit with at summer camp. And her mother, who was a nurse, for some reason started going on this big tirade about gay men and anal sex and bacteria and how it was just obvious that something like AIDS would happen, and all of this kind of thing. I don’t actually remember what occasioned this tirade, but I do remember it.

But thinking more about it, I’m sure that I’d heard about AIDS beforehand, because I think I had a subscription to this Toronto anarchist newspaper *Kick It Over* before then, which I think my parents had gotten me as a birthday present or something like that. And there was stuff in *Kick It Over* definitely.

GK: Right. So, you mentioned *Kick It Over*, but are there other things you can remember reading that would’ve related to AIDS or political perspectives on AIDS in that period of time?

KS: A little bit later, after I’d left high school... so, in the late eighties, maybe even early nineties. But yeah, there was *Gay Community News*. There was *OutWeek* and there was *Out* and there was also *The Guardian* [an independent left paper]. It was probably actually in *The Guardian* and *Gay Community News* that I would’ve first read about AIDS activism, probably about AIDS activism in Boston and New York because that’s where those two newspapers came out of.

GK: Do you remember reading either *The Body Politic* or *Rites* magazine during those periods?

KS: I do remember reading *Rites*, but my impression was that it came later. It could be completely and utterly inaccurate, but the way I remembered it was that there was *The Body Politic*... I wasn't really aware of when it was coming out, but I remember that book *Flaunting It*, which I think maybe came out afterwards, and it was an anthology of some pieces. And then my impression was that after *The Body Politic*, there was *Rites* but also that *Rites* was early nineties?

GK: *Rites* folded in 1992 and started in 1984.

KS: So I'm remembering wrong. I know that you know when it is. I'm saying this so that you can gauge how bad my memory is of those years. [laughter]

GK: Well, there was *Pink Ink* in '83 and then *Rites*...

KS: *Rites* wasn't starting in '83.

GK: *Rites* would be '84 because *Pink Ink* lasted for a while, and then would have died in 1984. And *The Body Politic* ends in '87.

KS: Okay, well that would make sense because I left home and joined the anarchist scene in 1986. So, I wasn't actually reading much radical literature with the exception of *Kick It Over* and this other anarchist newspaper *Reality Now* prior to '86.

GK: Obviously, from the beginning AIDS was understood as a medical and health issue, but at some point, some people began to consider it also to be a political question that people could organize around. Do you have any sense of how that might have taken place for you?

KS: Yeah, there was this zine – although I don't know if people called them zines back then – that came out of Toronto, put out by some people who called themselves the Queer Anarchist Network. And the first issue was called *Jerking Off* and the second issue was called *Coming On*. And when *Jerking Off* arrived at the Alternative Bookstore, which was the anarchist bookstore that I worked at, because of some cartoons drawn by G.B. Jones and because of some discussion of pedophilia, it was pulled, i.e. it was banned. And then there was an intense series of debates within the collective about whether or not to ban it. And it was subsequently unbanned. And so I was definitely aware of *Jerking Off*, which contained stuff about AIDS and AIDS activism.

Around that same year, which I think was 1988, there was the Toronto Anarchist Survival Gathering happening. And two people from Toronto, who had been involved with the magazine *Jerking Off* came through Montreal, and they had been involved also in producing safer sex materials ... It wasn't so much that it was explicit, it was also that it was visually and aesthetically very challenging. It was punk-rock, collage style kind of stuff that they brought. And it kind of blew my mind, and they kind of blew my mind. You know, I think I was probably aware of AIDS activism before then, but that made it exciting. And then going to Toronto for the Survival Gathering, there

was a collective queer anarchist house, Cathedral B, across from Christie Pits on Crawford. Many people from Cathedral B were involved in AIDS activism and AIDS activism was definitely discussed a lot at the Survival Gathering, and so that also made it very exciting.

GK: Do you remember if there were specific workshops or...?

KS: I'm sure there were, but I don't actually remember.

GK: So, you had some connections with people in Cathedral B after some of them came through here?

KS: Yeah. Cathedral B would be where I would stay when I'd go to Toronto for the next few years, and you know it always struck me as very different from anything that existed in Montreal that I was aware of... There was a real sense that Toronto was where it was at. Yeah, I know. [laughter] Not only in terms of anarchist politics, but also in terms of queer politics, also in terms of AIDS politics. It just seemed to be a super-vibrant scene. And it was compared to Montreal. Like, Montreal had an anarchist bookstore, which Toronto didn't have I don't think, and it had a radical left self-managed café, and I was involved with both. And Toronto didn't have that. But on the other hand, you know, I remember going to Toronto and staying at Cathedral B, and there was just a constant flow of people, and discussions and weirdness – it was very exciting.

GK: That's great. So, you talked about being involved in the anarchist scene here and obviously being influenced by some of what was going on in Toronto. One of the questions we ask in terms of people's involvements is what political perspectives did they bring with them that helped to inform that activism. Is there anything around anarchism that you felt you brought with you into AIDS organizing?

KS: I mean anarchism is just where I was at in a very intense way. This was perhaps the norm for radicals of my generation – born in the 70s – and subsequent generations too, however I don't think it had been previously. So, yeah, I brought it with me. But what that would mean in practical terms for me myself to have brought anarchism with me? Probably not much. However, in Montreal the fact that it wasn't just me bringing this with me, but that it also formed part of the context in which Réaction SIDA came together, might be more significant. There were several people who... I don't know if they all identified as anarchists but they were all a part of the anarchist scene; they all worked at the anarchist bookstore. So as a result, you know, the idea of non-hierarchical ways of doing things was just taken for granted. I think anarchism kind of implicitly was a part of a lot of that. And definitely anarchism... The emphasis on direct action and the emphasis on militancy being something good in and of itself, which I got from anarchism and which was reinforced by anarchism, was a part of what made the AIDS activist movement, as I read articles about it happening in other cities, seem so attractive. So, in that sense, anarchism prepped me for being open to the possibility of AIDS activism.

GK: Prior to Réaction SIDA being formed, were you connected with any AIDS groups or any AIDS projects that would've existed in Montreal?

KS: No. I remember going by CSAM (Comité Sida Aide Montréal), the Montreal AIDS Committee... I think I went by there just because there was a sense that I had working at the bookstore and that that was a kind of link that would be good to make. And at times, I think, before Réaction SIDA happened, before then I think I'd had the impression at certain times (as bookstore collective membership fluctuated) that I was the only person who wasn't straight identified at the bookstore. So, I guess I felt – even though I was also the youngest person there – I felt it was something I should do, to try and make that link. But it wasn't successful; you know I remember going to the their center on the Plateau - and I've had similar experiences a gazillion different times with a gazillion different kinds of things since - it was that kind of depressing experience: You go there. You're not a part of... You know what I mean? It's just weird. It's not an activist group. It's a group, which is maybe providing really necessary services to a particular community, but if you're not organically a part of the community, you just feel very out of place. And you want to connect, but there's no real way of connecting. I mean I guess saying that, I realize that's probably much the same way that many people felt when they'd go to the anarchist bookstore, or what many people would complain about feeling when they'd go to the Café Commun Commune. Like, "This seems really good, but we don't really feel at home here."

GK: Right. So, prior to Réaction SIDA being formed, one of the things that happens in many centres is there's a moment of rupture between the AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) as they're developing and at least a group of people living with AIDS or HIV. Do you remember anything like that happening?

KS: It could've happened in that particular way, but if it did I'm not aware of it. I do remember when Réaction SIDA formed, and looking back I'm not under the impression that most people in Réaction SIDA were people living with HIV or living with AIDS. I could be wrong about that, but that's just not the impression that I have so many decades later. But I do definitely get the sense that there was a feeling that we want to do something different than CSAM. That their approach wasn't adequate. Our reference points would've been stuff happening in the States or AIDS ACTION NOW! in Toronto.

GK: So, before Réaction SIDA gets formed, there's at least some knowledge about ACT UP in the States and AIDS ACTION NOW!

KS: Definitely. There was definitely knowledge about that, definitely knowledge about stuff happening in Toronto. And my memory... Again, all of my memories could be completely wrong, but my memory is that there was a sense that, well, why isn't anything happening in Montreal? Like, there's something really messed up. Not that we're missing out, because that sounds kind of crass; I think there was maybe a feeling of "we're missing out", but there was also a feeling of "we're not doing what we should be doing." Or, "what's wrong with us that we can't be doing this important work that other people are doing elsewhere?"

GK: And would you have had some knowledge of AIDS ACTION NOW! because some of the people at Cathedral B were involved in it?

KS: Definitely.

GK: Okay, so that sort of connection exists.

KS: Yeah. Some people at Cathedral B. I wouldn't be surprised if there was also mention of it maybe in *Jerking Off* or *Coming On* – those magazines – but yeah, definitely people in Cathedral B. And not just Cathedral B... Like, Cathedral B is where I stayed, but those people would know other people and... You know what I mean? It was an entire scene.

GK: And AIDS ACTION NOW! becomes a public group very early in 1988, right? So, this is the period. And then the anarchist conference is that summer, is it not?

KS: Yeah.

GK: Yeah. Okay, so we can get to see how all these things are mixing up together. The murder of Joe Rose seems to have something to do with the initiation of Réaction SIDA. Can you tell us a little bit about who Joe Rose was, and what happened?

KS: He was a guy who... I mean the way the media always talked about... We were even talking about him the other day, and this was what we remembered, "Didn't he have pink hair?" Because this was a big deal, I guess, in the media coverage. He was a young gay guy. I think he was actually 22 or 23. I'd been under the impression that he was younger, but then I was reading through some material and I think he was in his early twenties. He was on a bus and there were some kids on the bus who were hassling him and who ended up stabbing him and he ended up dying. So, that would've been I think March of '89?

GK: Yes.

KS: And I wasn't aware of this at the time, but there were some young progressive – some of them straight, some of them gay – journalists who decided, "We're going to push this." And who did push it. I'm not sure if it was through the *Montreal Mirror* or even the *Montreal Daily News*. The latter was a newspaper which was weird ... format-wise, aesthetically it looked like and everyone thought it would be like the *Toronto Sun* – super-right-wing, nasty – except that a bunch of young progressive journalists got jobs there. So actually, I think it ended up being the better of the Montreal newspapers at the time.

So Joe Rose's murder became a news story, and I just remember buying a whole bunch of copies of the paper and going into Androgyny, which was the gay/lesbian/feminist bookstore at the time, and dropping some off with Lawrence, who was the guy that ran the bookstore. And, I think, just saying, "We've got to have a demonstration tonight." And I'm not sure if it was my idea, if it was someone else's idea, maybe someone around Alternative Bookstore's idea, or maybe just someone I didn't even know and I just somehow heard about it, but there was a demonstration and, I think, it was that night, though it may have been the next night. It was a really good turn out for a "spontaneous" demonstration. I think it was hundreds of people maybe even. Today demonstrations in Montreal can be very militant, but at the time they could be but most of them weren't. And so by the standards of the time, this seemed to me to be a very militant

demonstration, though looking back that probably was just because cops shoved people and people took the street anyway. It marched through the Village, from memory, down Ontario to Frontenac Metro, where Rose had been killed. “We won’t be silenced by your violence” is the only slogan I remember from it.

At the end of the demo, the way that I remember it is that Karen announced that there’d be a meeting for a group the next week at Alternative Bookstore, the anarchist bookstore, which Karen was also working at, and which a bunch of other people who were at the demo had also worked at. And that’s what happened. There was a meeting. A lot of people showed up – from my memory predominantly anglophone, predominantly young, overwhelmingly white. I don’t remember much about the meeting, except a *Gazette* reporter showed up and there was a debate – “Do we let him stay or not?” – which took a lot of time. And in the end this very large, young man was towering over the *Gazette* reporter screaming “AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, not AIDS Coalition to Unleash the Press!” and the reporter got booted out. There was a lot of bad feeling toward the *Gazette* at the time, just because of their underreporting or bad reporting, it was felt, about AIDS and about queer issues in general.

GK: That was the first meeting of Réaction SIDA.

KS: That was the first meeting. And the subsequent meetings, from what I recall, also happened at the bookstore. And from what I recall, there’d been talk before. It wasn’t like the idea of setting up a group like Réaction SIDA came about after Joe Rose’s death. Before Joe Rose’s death people had been talking about, you know, “Why don’t we have a group like this?” And I even remember coming back from Toronto once and I’d been told by a friend in Toronto, who I think was either in or close to AIDS ACTION NOW!, “You guys really have to start a group in Montreal because there’s this big AIDS conference happening and it’s really going to be pathetic if you don’t have a group in Montreal when this happens,” and telling people about that. And I have to tell you, the reaction of people in Montreal to people in Toronto telling them what to do... nonplussed?

GK: So, was Réaction SIDA mostly formed to organize for the AIDS conference or was it...?

KS: No, it wasn’t formed to organize for the AIDS conference, but in retrospect that does determine the arc of its existence. Leading up to the AIDS conference and then while it did last for months afterwards, the AIDS conference was its one big thing. But no, it definitely did not form either officially or unofficially in order to do stuff for the AIDS conference. It formed because there was a sense that there should be a militant or radical AIDS activist group in Montreal. And I don’t remember all of the various things that it did. There was a benefit concert, maybe to raise funds to buy whistles to distribute, as an anti-violence intervention? Anyways, that happened at Fofounes Électriques, and was well attended, lots of fun. I remember there were... I mean there still are... monthly, public “go and ask questions to the Mayor” things at City Hall. And I remember at one of these things we held a demo inside City Hall where people threw leaflets around and were chanting, “We’re here. We’re queer. We’re not going shopping” – which I’m still not quite sure what that means. [laughter] And, “We’re here. We’re queer. And we’re going to vote,” which is interesting because, you know, there were a few anarchists or anarchistish people in the group, and I think some people might get the wrong impression that this was maybe anarchists

instrumentalizing AIDS, but I never had that impression being in the group, and clearly that slogan would tend to argue against that kind of thing.

Other things the group did... Some of Joe Rose's friends were in the group, and because it had formed in the aftermath – directly after his murder – anti-violence stuff was definitely something that was discussed a lot. And I'm not even sure if at the beginning, if it wasn't a debate – "Well, are we going to be an AIDS activist group?" or "Are we going to be a group dealing with a bunch of different issues?" I do know the decision was made to be an AIDS activist group, but I don't think in a sense of any rigid exclusion of other things. I wish I could remember more.

GK: So, obviously decisions got made in Réaction SIDA. Do you know how that was done, or whether there were... Was it just a general meeting, or were there smaller subcommittees or working groups?

KS: My impression was a general meeting and not very rigorous consensus. Like, it was just, "Well, do we all agree?" "Yeah, we all agree." There may have been voting. I don't know. There definitely were some subgroups which formed, but my impression is that these were task-oriented or research-oriented. But they didn't really have decision-making power ... You know, it wasn't like the media subgroup will *decide* media strategy or policy, but I'm sure the media subgroup would decide the technical issues of who to call and that kind of thing. But all of that could be wrong.

GK: So, the group is formed in March. You have talked about the City Hall action, but it sounds like in practice most of the action gets oriented around the AIDS Conference.

KS: Yeah. I think that's accurate.

GK: So, do you have memories of how connections may have been made with AIDS ACTION NOW! or ACT UP New York City around this? I mean I can tell you from the interview that we did with Tim McCaskell that he must have come to Montreal in search of allies. I think he says something like a week before Joe Rose was killed and could not find anyone. So, every single group that he spoke to, he came back and reported that, "There's nothing," right. And then that obviously changed.

KS: Right. That's really interesting. I didn't know that he'd come to town. But that makes complete sense, you know – that makes complete, complete sense.

For myself, like I said, my reference points for this kind of stuff were people who lived in Toronto. I don't know if they were members of AIDS ACTION NOW! I kind of have the impression that many of them maybe weren't. But they definitely were AIDS activists, and they came into town for the Conference. And I don't know how atypical that was of other people in Réaction SIDA, meaning that people would have informal connections. Like, I certainly had no connections whatsoever in New York City, but I do know that there were... I remember now. I mean I don't remember their names. There were a couple of young, gay guys who were just living-wise going back and forth between Montreal and New York City, and they had experience in ACT UP in New York City. So,

they presumably had friends or whatever there. And they were also very active in Réaction SIDA. On an organizational level, though, I don't remember.

GK: Right. I think that I know what the answer is going to be around this, but one of the things that AIDS ACTION NOW! and ACT UP New York City prepared was this “Montreal Manifesto,” which I’m pretty sure Réaction SIDA didn’t have any part to play in because it was formulated before those connections were made, but is there any sort of impact of that – “Montreal Manifesto” – on Réaction SIDA?

KS: No. I wouldn't... Well, my impression is no. My impression is that didn't have any impact. My impression is that we were aware of it. I wouldn't be surprised if becoming aware of it after the fact, some people might not have been, “Well, that sucks that we weren't a part of it.” But I don't remember it being a big deal. Although, I do remember something actually. I remember that – although this doesn't so much have to do with Réaction SIDA, except it may have to do with how Réaction SIDA was spoken about in other groups. I remember a member of ACT UP New York who was clearly on the left within ACT UP New York – although he insisted on wearing a little Canadian flag pin, because I think he thought Canada was some kind of socialist country or something – who was talking about... There was a point in the “Montreal Manifesto,” I think, about money being wasted on arms or...

GK: Yes.

KS: Right. And he was talking about how that was a big debate and how someone or another had said, “Well, we can't have that in because that's really radical, and maybe the people in Montreal won't like that kind of thing,” which was kind of like the opposite of the situation. And I remember telling him, “Well, no, it was if anything, we were all down with that.” And the idea of that not being okay would have been crazy because that was not a particularly radical position, at least not in Montreal.

GK: Right. And the “Montreal Manifesto” actually called for the major redistribution of wealth from the North to the South to actually deal with the AIDS crisis. So, it's actually, in some ways, quite a profound document. I cannot remember how it was formulated. It was formulated between people in AIDS ACTION NOW! and ACT UP New York City. I mean Herb Spiers was the major person in ACT UP New York City, and he came to Toronto a number of times and there were meetings. I actually have no idea how it was developed. But it was quite an amazing document, I actually think – for the time in particular.

So, one of the things that happens during the activism at the AIDS Conference is Réaction SIDA somehow gets the space – the activist centre on...

KS: Pine and Bleury, I think.

GK: Maybe it was Parc.

KS: Yeah, Parc and Bleury are the same street.

GK: Okay.

KS: Yeah. Well, that entire area is full of co-ops, which were won through housing struggles in the 1970s. And less and less so over the years, but still today there's a lot of activists and a lot of leftists, even some anarchists, communists, whatever, who live there. The Café Commun Commune, the radical left café, which I was a part of, was in a space owned by the co-ops, three blocks away from the centre. And essentially my understanding is the space was just donated. And my understanding also – it could be incorrect because it wasn't me who would have done this – but my understanding was that all of the computers and everything were purchased from someplace where people knew they could return them afterwards. And so it was a super-professional, cool space, but it was set up a day or two beforehand and taken down immediately afterwards. And I think at zero cost.

GK: That's quite amazing. I mean the only group that would've had any money then was ACT UP New York City, and I don't think there was a transfer of resources there.

KS: Yeah.

GK: Do you remember how... Like, would Réaction SIDA as a whole have tried to organize for the space, or were there particular individuals within it?

KS: I think there were some particular individuals within it, who maybe knew people in the co-ops or, you know, they were well-placed to do that, but I don't remember their names.

GK: So, I mean obviously there's an awful lot that happened that week.

KS: Yeah.

GK: One of the things we're interested in is stories or memories of what AIDS activism was like. Obviously, there's the taking over the opening session, but there's lots of other stuff. So, maybe to start off with, the taking over the opening session ...

KS: Well, I remember being really excited about the conference beforehand. I remember making vegan black bean dip for the Toronto anarchists I knew who'd be coming, and I was so happy that they were happy with my black bean dip [laughter] when I showed up at the centre. I remember some people from somewhere else were staying at my place; I forget who. And yeah, I remember there were big meetings at that centre every night, which I'm sure at the time were, you know, long and difficult and all of this. But I just remember it as being exciting. And I guess the... I mean it was all really striking to me. There was the Opening, where we kind of marched in and stormed in – though I mean, we didn't have to "storm" – and we basically held the room. It was Mulroney who was supposed to speak, right? And Mulroney delayed and delayed and delayed because we were there. I'm not sure, but I think he actually canceled. Yeah, so, it was really good. I remember he was there with me [motions to his partner] and we were there with our kid who was very, very... What? Two years old in the stroller, or something like that, or less than two years old. Jeez.

Anyway, that was fun and it was... It just seemed really good. And it was also... I've seen it a few times since, but not often enough, a situation where you're up against an institution or some opposing force, and it becomes obvious that your opponent has decided beforehand that they're going to back down if there's a confrontation. And so you don't know they're going to back down, but you're pushing, and every time you push you're slightly surprised but happy because they don't push back. But also, you know, it's not like you're having to fight with baseball bats to get in or anything like that either.

And then I remember showing up the next day and – you know, in the morning – and there was just all these people everywhere. And people had set up little stalls or kiosks outside and it suddenly felt like, “Wow, this is a lot bigger than I realized it was going to be.” And, you know, how... Again, it felt really exciting and subversive, almost like a festival. I remember when people were realizing – because it was really expensive to get in and you needed little ID badges – “Those colour photocopies we made of the ID badges, they worked!” And we're now colour photocopying passes, and I think in the end they just said, “You don't need a pass.” But it was still really exciting. I didn't do this – and I don't even know if this is true for that reason – but some of those anarchists who were here ended up claiming that they'd crashed some very hoity-toity expensive dinner thing. Remember, besides doctors and researchers, there were politicians and lobbyists and whatnot from around the world there. And basically I mean the way they were saying it was, “When they weren't looking we peed in their wine bottles,” and this, that, and the other. I don't know if any of that's true, but these stories were being told to me and I thought they were true at the time, and it just added to this sense...

And that centre, you know, calls from the press – everything was catapulted up onto this really intense level. Because we'd been a tiny, little group that just formed a little bit before and I'd never seen anything like this kind of thing. I had participated in all kinds of radical events or protests, even really large ones, but what was new for me was the combination of professional activists with radicals more of the type I was used to, as well as people actually dealing personally with the issues involved, and with queer politics and sensibilities and identities being front and center – all creating something that everybody seemed to feel was historically significant, a turning point even.

At the same time, there were interesting culture clashes. Back then there were some gay bars in Montreal that wouldn't allow women in. And I remember when some people – from ACT UP New York, I think it was – weren't allowed into one of these bars because some of their group were women, they wanted to do a demonstration outside the bar, which at the time I imagine... I either probably thought was great or probably had no opinion about... but I remember one guy in particular was incensed. He was an anglo guy, but, you know, he felt this was like “imperialism” – people coming in and telling us that we can't do things our way, and that this exclusion of women was just a part of Montreal gay culture or whatnot and should be respected as such. And I also have heard, but I don't know the details, that some of the people of colour from ACT UP New York, basically, that there were incidents of racism at bars that they went to, which were dealt with one way or another, but I don't know the details. I just remember hearing.

GK: I remember hearing that too.

KS: Right, which wouldn't surprise me in the least.

GK: I mean obviously the ACT UP group was predominantly white, but there were a significant number of people of colour with them too.

KS: Yeah. And there was also language stuff, which at the time... Within Réaction SIDA, the people I was closest with were obviously the anarchist people. The others I didn't know very well, although it was friendly. It was, from memory, an overwhelmingly anglophone group. But the funny thing in the left – including the anarchist left – in the late 1980s in Montreal is that anglophone leftists and anglophone anarchists tended to be really gung ho about Quebec nationalism, and about things like Bill 101 and all of this kind of thing. So, I remember even though we were mainly anglos, I remember some anglophones being really incensed if people brought English signs to a protest because the anglophone media will just take photos of the English signs. Which in retrospect seems completely appropriate, because if you're media dealing in a particular language and your readers have that language and there's a sign in that language, why would you avoid taking a photo of that sign? But, I think, that people complained about that. I'm not sure what people from Toronto or New York felt about those complaints.

And yeah, beyond that, I remember at the end there was some kind of "evaluation meeting" at the center, and I was taken aback when a member of ACT UP New York – after complimenting us on the fantastic space that we got – said that he'd nonetheless been really disturbed by how many conversations about anarchism he'd overheard, compared to how few conversations about AIDS. And I hadn't seen them as being in opposition to each other. And, you know, people get – they get to grandstanding and very self-righteous and all indignant and all of this. But I remember afterwards a friend of mine who was a longtime anarchist and who was also an AIDS activist from Toronto, she told me over dinner that not everyone has to work on AIDS. And I think she thought that I and perhaps other people could benefit from hearing that. And I remember, I thought that over for quite some time afterwards, it stayed with me, and in retrospect I think it was obvious but also really valuable advice she was giving.

While I can't know for sure, my impression is that unlike other AIDS activist groups, Réaction SIDA wasn't built around a core of people who were themselves HIV positive or living with AIDS. That's not to say that people weren't affected by it ... It wasn't ideologically driven in the sense of people saying, "Well, I'm an anarchist. I want to set up this front-group," but was maybe ideologically driven for some of us because people thought, "This is an important issue and it's our job to be doing stuff on important issues." And I think that's maybe what that guy from ACT UP New York was sensing and he didn't like it. And he referred, I think, in the complaint he made to the fact that ACT UP had had problems with Trotskyists. And, I think, maybe he was talking about the International Socialists, or something like this, and that they'd had to part ways. I don't know. Those are my memories.

GK: So, in terms of Réaction SIDA's participation in what was happening that week, because obviously it was a really big thing that was going on in everyone's life, and people were at the Centre and involved in meetings. Because the basic logic was each day was supposed to

be about a different issue – like, one day was anonymous testing, another one was sex worker rights. Part of how that was handled was, you know, there’d be a speaker from ACT UP, there’d be a speaker from AIDS ACTION NOW!, and a speaker from Réaction SIDA... Was that part of how it was handled? I do know that on the anonymous testing day Eric Smith was the speaker for Réaction SIDA. Do you have any memory of whether that was...?

KS: That would make sense, but I don’t remember.

GK: And in that context, there’s a specific action – I think it’s on the Friday of the conference specifically directed against the Quebec government. Do you have any memory of that?

KS: You know, I think I have a memory. Though, I could be remembering another one. Was it someone talking and other people heckling? Yeah. I have a memory of being there, but I’m afraid I don’t remember anything else.

GK: I don’t know if I was there, but I do remember Réaction SIDA people actually saying, “We’ve supported you, in terms of the things you’ve been raising” – like, ACT UP New York City actually did specific things around people from the New York State government who were there, public health officials and stuff – “We’ve supported you. Now it’s time for you to support us.” So, I don’t know how effective that was and I have only the vaguest memory of that.

KS: Right. I don’t remember.

GK: Okay. So, we’ll try and find out more about that. You’ve already told us something about the tensions between the different groups that were operating in this shared space, right?

KS: Right, although, I wouldn’t want to overstate them. Like, I’m mentioning the tensions because that’s what there is to mention. But my impression would be that it wasn’t particularly conflictual... In fact my impression was that everything meshed very well ... I mean, when people are going to complain, they’re going to complain about... At a certain level, we all complain more than we note the not-complaintworthy, but my impression was that it went very well.

GK: That’s good. I mean it was an incredible experience. So, one of the things that we’ve looked at and that was sent to you is this evaluation sort of document from Réaction SIDA sent to AIDS ACTION NOW! and ACT UP New York City. It’s actually, I think, fairly carefully written, but it does raise a series of concerns around a certain sense that Réaction SIDA people seemed to express of being dismissed because “we’re too young.”

KS: I definitely remember that. Yes.

GK: Can you tell us anything about that?

KS: Oh, I thought that I’d explained... My perspective was maybe a little different, because I was 18 and several years younger than anyone else in Réaction SIDA, and I was also several years younger

than anyone else at the Café Commun Commun, or at the Alternative Bookstore... this is a generational thing. Just a few years ago, a friend of mine, same age as me, pointed out he was always the youngest person in every group until he was suddenly the oldest person in every group – because there was a dip in political struggle at a certain point – and that has been my experience too... So, I was already used to being the youngest everywhere. However, all of these other people in Réaction SIDA who, to me, were older than me and grown ups and all of this - so what do they have to complain about? - I remember some people being offended –I think maybe something had been overheard that had perhaps been meant as a compliment but not taken that way – “Yeah, the people in Réaction SIDA are all young and cute.” But from memory it was not completely untrue, we were all younger than the average in the other groups.

GK: So, everyone in Réaction SIDA was actually young and cute, right? [laughter]

KS: Well, yeah! [laughter] I guess. There you go. These aren't necessarily bad things, unless you're the one being told you're young and cute, at which point you wish that you weren't. But also being the youngest group... I think it probably wouldn't have bothered people so much if they'd have been young and cute in ACT UP New York, because it was the heavy-weight. I imagine it bothered people because it was kind of overlaid with the fact that Réaction SIDA was a really new group. There was a lot less cumulative knowledge in Réaction SIDA than in ACT UP New York or AIDS ACTION NOW!, or in many of the other groups which were active in North America. And so there was a sense that we weren't being taken seriously. And there was also a sense of insecurity perhaps.

GK: Another important thing that I think gets raised in that evaluation is clearly, there were women there from AIDS ACTION NOW! and really powerful women there from ACT UP New York City too. But my sense also was that the gender composition of Réaction SIDA was there was a much higher proportion of women and feminist women involved in it than were either present from AIDS ACTION NOW! or from ACT UP New York City. Did gender play a certain part in some of those dynamics?

KS: At the conference you mean?

GK: Well, in the organizing around it. And perhaps in terms of some of the responses to people from Réaction SIDA both from AIDS ACTION NOW! and from ACT UP New York City. I mean the vast bulk of people from ACT UP were men, right? But there was a very strong women's group there too – like, Maxine Wolf and Mary Maggenti and other people were there.

KS: At the conference itself, I wouldn't be surprised. I'm sure it was the kind of thing people complained about, just because when people are being dismissed and the person being dismissed is younger and the other one is older, they say it's because I'm younger - and they're often right. And when they're a woman and the other people dismissing them are predominantly men, sexism often plays a part. So yeah, I imagine that was a part of it. That's not something I have a strong memory of, but then again I'm male, and that certainly makes things like that easier to be oblivious to. However, I definitely had a strong memory of gender – that kind of gender composition being

an attribute of Réaction SIDA. Also, my impression was that had a lot to do with what happened after the conference with Réaction SIDA. So, I don't know if you want to move on to that?

GK: Well, before we move onto what happens after the conference, are there any other memories you have of what happened at the conference or the organizing around it that you would want to talk about?

KS: What dates did the conference happen?

GK: It was in early June, 1989.

KS: I was moving away from Montreal July 1st, which isn't a part of my memory of the conference, but probably means that, while I was at the conference everyday, I probably wasn't taking on more than I had to in terms of future things. Which may be a part of the reason why I don't remember. So, the stuff I'm remembering is anecdote stuff, not organizing stuff.

GK: Right.

KS: So, yeah. This has nothing to do with conference, but there was the Tiananmen Square thing happening. And I remember the morning the massacre occurred. I mean it's understandable, but also it's really horrible sounding... I remember someone stood up and the way it was expressed... Like, everyone in the room, I think, at the Centre – the activist centre – gasped and was like “This is horrible that this has happened,” but the way it was phrased is, “We really have to be on our game today, because we have a lot of competition for headlines.”

And the Conference Centre is in Chinatown in Montreal, which is already a very small Chinatown because it was hemmed in by years of racist urban planning and suspicious fires, but the Chinese community held a march that day and a bunch of us decided to go to the march rather than do other stuff. I remember the fucking LaRouchites [a right-wing political formation] showed up at the march and, of course, that just adds layer upon layer. They weren't there because of the AIDS conference or anything like that, but they were notorious amongst people who did work around AIDS, because they'd push these ideas of mosquitoes transmitting HIV and proposals like concentration camps for people with HIV.

GK: Do you want to, just for the purposes of people reading the transcript, mention who the LaRouchites are?

KS: Oh. They're this wacky group of people who follow this wacky guy called Lyndon LaRouche, who is on the far, far, far right of the political spectrum, but is also just so weird in the way that he packages politics. He goes on about stuff about Aristotle and Plato and space programs and everything that... Normally I don't refer to far right people as wacky, but the Larouchites are just wacky. So, they were there. And I just remember it turning into a fist-fight unfortunately. Because the people from the Chinese community were really upset to have a bunch of white people slugging it out in the middle of their demo after this horrible massacre, but there you have it. And yeah, that's all I really remember.

GK: But it sounds like your experience of the conference was, “This is amazing.”

KS: Yeah. Definitely.

GK: Yeah, it was a really uplifting, politicizing experience for me.

KS: Yeah. 100 percent. Although, I also definitely felt like, “Wow, I’m out of my depth. Like, I don’t know nearly as much about all of this stuff as other people do, and I don’t know what I should be trying to learn. Should I be trying to learn about micro-biology? Or should I...” Do you know what I mean? It’s like, I knew nothing about any of these things except, coming from anarchism, I knew when people are fighting back for control over their lives it’s a good thing and you want to support them and you want to be a part of that kind of thing. But I knew nothing about the actual stuff. And it just seemed like a super- super- super-steep learning curve to try to learn about any of it, so when my friend from Toronto said, “You know, people don’t have to do AIDS activism work,” I remember thinking, “Oh. Well, in that case maybe I won’t go through that steep learning curve.”

GK: Okay. So, what happens to Réaction SIDA after the conference?

KS: Well, like I said, I moved away from Montreal after, but not that far away. It took an hour to get into town by bus. I came into town a lot. So, I kept on going to some Réaction SIDA meetings. I remember that. And Réaction SIDA did stuff after the conference, I think, on Prisoners’ Justice Day that year – probably it was Prisoners’ Justice Day, but it may have been earlier in the summer. Anyway, there was a demonstration outside of the Parthenais Remand Centre, which is no longer a remand centre – like, a jail for people who are waiting to go to trial – but it was at the time.

What happened back then was, when you would get arrested, you would be asked, “Do you want to have an HIV test?” and some people would say yes. And what happened is, there were three guys who had tested positive in those circumstances and despite them testing positive they weren’t given any medical care or anything like that. However, they were put into protective custody, which is where you’d be put if other prisoners would have a reason to want to harm you, like if you’re a snitch or maybe a child molester, or something like that. So, just being put in protective custody is already dangerous for someone, as it makes people think bad things about you. And also the conditions in protective custody were similar to being in isolation. So, these guys went on hunger strike for three days, protesting against the fact that they weren’t getting any medical care at all and the fact that they were essentially being put in these punitive conditions. My memory is that one of the women who was kind of like in an informal leadership role in Réaction SIDA either was in touch with these guys or met with them once and after that was like, “I don’t want to go into a men’s jail to have to deal with these guys. Can you do it?” And I was into doing it, so I went and...

Very low-level incoherent prisoner-related support is all I did in terms of AIDS stuff after that. And I’m not even sure if it’s accurate to say this in terms of AIDS stuff because I ended up doing it not living in Montreal and Réaction SIDA wouldn’t last that long. So I ended up doing it as an individual. And of the three guys, I only really stayed in touch with one of them – this guy Pierre

Maltais. So, it was an unfortunate kind of set up when one does things without collective structures; on the one hand, it feels more organic, and it *is* more organic because you become friends and all of this kind of thing... but that's not necessarily a good thing, because it means you don't have a structure backing you up. You also don't have a structure, you know, to do reality checks about what's the right thing to do or not, you just end up being friends. So, I stayed in touch with Pierre after that. He was transferred to the Federal Training Centre in Laval and then he got into a fight with a guard there. So, he was transferred to Archambault. At Archambault, he was like, you know, repeatedly beaten both by other prisoners and by guards. He was transferred to Donnacona, to Cowansville, and then he ended up being transferred to – the ultimate in protective custody – he was transferred to what they nicknamed the “Brian Mulroney Prison”, which is Port Cartier, which had been Brian Mulroney's riding, a completely economically depressed community. You know, the source of jobs had left and Prime Minister Mulroney got them a prison. And it was Port Cartier, and it would take about 12 hours drive to get there. It was way north on the north shore. And it's a protective custody prison. And he was sent there and I visited him a number of times there. But this was just doing stuff as an individual.

I'll flip back to Réaction SIDA now.

Réaction SIDA... My impression is that it didn't last the year. And my impression at the time was – and who knows decades later to what extent this is accurate or not – but I had a strong impression at the time that there were two guys, one of whom was from Montreal, Michael Hendricks, and one of whom was from ACT UP New York, Blane Mosley, and that they had subsequently worked to set up ACT UP Montreal, and whether intentionally or not, this worked to sideline Réaction SIDA... from their point of view my guess is that they maybe felt this was the responsible good thing to do? The conference had shown that there was a real possibility for some kind of AIDS activism in Montreal, and I guess for whatever reason, they didn't feel that Réaction SIDA was an appropriate vehicle for that kind of activism.

I definitely felt at the time that gender played a part in all this. Réaction SIDA, while I don't think it was mainly women, the core – like, the unofficial leadership, my impression was they were women. I also had the impression that the politics wasn't where everyone was at ... Like, I wouldn't have described Réaction SIDA as a radical left organization or an anarchist organization or any of that – in fact, probably just as small a minority of people in RS had politics like that as in some of the larger better-established AIDS activist groups – but I think just to have so many of the core people being people who would also be associated with something like that, you know, maybe they just felt, “This is a bunch of lunatics. We can't let them be the ones doing AIDS activism in Montreal.” Or maybe “lunatics” is too grandiose, maybe they just thought “these are amateurs”. So, I had the impression that Réaction SIDA was supplanted, and whether this was a conscious plan or not some people probably felt that was a good thing, and the form this took was ACT UP Montreal. My impression was that Réaction SIDA ceased to exist because ACT UP Montreal soaked up that energy.

I was living in Lachute. I was doing stuff with Pierre, which was basically like I said, informal, organic, as a friend as much as anything else. I remember going to some ACT UP meetings to bring up Pierre's concerns. I remember at one meeting, held on the Plateau I think, there seemed to be

some interest. Maybe people did something as a result, I forget. After that I don't know if I went to other meetings before I went to a meeting that would've been held in, I don't know if it was called the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre, or something like that, on Saint Catherine Street in the Centre Sud, in the Gay Village. It was summer time. It would've probably been 1990 and Pierre wanted something. It could've been ... you know, I re-read an article I wrote around that time, so, based on that, I think what he probably wanted was money to hire a lawyer for compassionate release, because he had this idea of getting out and not dying in prison. And he also had this idea of setting up some kind of drop-in centre or something like that for people living with AIDS. And it could've been that, or also it could've been, as I said, he periodically suffered harassment. He wasn't from the left. And he wasn't... You know, he was a lifelong criminal. He had been in and out of jail from a young age and stuff escalated, but he was a professional criminal. It wasn't because he was a fuck-up and got into fights at bars. It was drug smuggling, weapons smuggling, bank robbery, whatever. And that's how he'd ended up in prison and found out he was HIV-positive, and because the prison wasn't providing any medical care or information, he educated himself and he ended up more knowledgeable than the doctors at some of the prisons where he was at. So, at the time, I think probably what it was, piecing things together, he either wanted compassionate release, or he wanted to be sent back to the medium level Federal Training Centre in Laval, where he had felt that the doctor was better than the doctors at the other prisons. I just remember going to the ACT UP meeting and I knew Michael Hendricks, not personally, but interacted with him, and saying, "You know, I have this letter I want to read from Pierre. He needs help again," and it was before the meeting. And I remember his words, because this is the first time I ever heard the expression, and Michael Hendricks said, "Well, you know, I have the impression that Pierre Maltais is a bit of a tar baby, and we really don't want to be spending our energy on him." Probably that wasn't a collective decision; it was probably just his. Who knows what would have happened if I'd have stayed at the meeting, or if I'd have been living in Montreal and gone to all of the meetings and everything? But I wasn't. So, I didn't even stick around for the meeting and that is the last time that I was ever at an ACT UP thing.

So, yeah, that's what happened to Réaction SIDA, and that's my very limited experience with ACT UP Montreal.

GK: Just one thing to come back to because I didn't know anything about this. I'm interested in the specific Réaction SIDA action at the prison.

KS: ...at Parthenais. Yeah.

GK: Okay. So, do you remember anything more about that? What the issues would have been? You said it might've been on Prisoners' Justice Day.

KS: It might've been on Prisoners' Justice Day. Doing this has jogged my memory about a lot of things. Also, realizing that my file folder about this stuff has gone missing has upset me to no end. Because as you can see, the other file folders didn't go missing. [laughter] So, it was a demo; I think it was only organized by Réaction SIDA. I don't think it was in conjunction with any other group. And it was held outside of Parthenais, which is on Parthenais Street, not far actually from Frontenac Metro, where Joe Rose had been killed. And I don't know if we were... I doubt we were a

hundred people. I think we were probably dozens, but the advantage of having something like that is that – as well as the people from Réaction SIDA, who might not normally have done prison stuff – you also had a smattering of people from the Montreal left and prisoners’ justice scenes, which weren’t humungous by any means, but it means that it was a slightly larger demo. And I do remember that Pierre said afterwards that they could see us and hear us from their cells and were really happy. So, that was good, because the purpose of the demo was to show support for Pierre and the other prisoners living with HIV and AIDS.

GK: But after that, that wasn’t a sustained practice on the part of Réaction SIDA as a group because it folded.

KS: Well, from what I can recall, Réaction SIDA as a group folded.

GK: Okay.

KS: There was, separate from that, a phone zap. Which would be, in the days before email, the word would go out on such-and-such a day, sometimes it would be at such-and-such an hour, just everyone phone this place and complain about something. It could be really effective. Prisoner support activists still do this today. It can still be really effective to tie up somebody’s phone line, and just everyone complaining about something. And we did that for Pierre also. But yeah, my impression is that while there were some improvements at Parthenais, they were minor and things remained really bad – for instance, Parthenais was always overcrowded, and the way in which overcrowding was dealt with would be that Pierre would be shuffled between his cell on – I don’t know if it was the tenth floor to the protective custody wing on the sixth floor and back and forth. And obviously, you know, getting somebody and creating a situation that other people think they’re in protective custody can be really dangerous for them, especially if then they’re not in protective custody the next day. There were other things too, really brutal things, for instance I also remember Pierre telling me once, while he was at Parthenais, that the way in which they dealt with the overcrowding was that... I mean he used some language, which obviously wasn’t the language I would use even at the time, but essentially what it was is that either there were some known-to-be-queer prisoners or perhaps trans prisoners even, and the way in which the administration would deal with the overcrowding would be they’d basically have those prisoners transferred into the general population so that other prisoners could have sex with them ... So that guys could blow off some steam. I mean Pierre would’ve been bringing it up as in: “You know, this is really bad, this is a way that HIV can be transmitted.” But besides that even, when you think of it, it’s just a really horrendous thing for those queer or trans prisoners whose bodies were being used by the administration to keep things under control.

GK: Yeah. So, maybe going back to ACT UP Montreal...

KS: Yeah.

GK: I mean obviously you didn’t participate in the same way at all as with Réaction SIDA, but is there anything more maybe you could tell us about it. How long did it last? So, Michael Hendricks and Blane seemed to be the central initiators of it?

KS: Yeah. Definitely my impression was that Michael Hendricks and Blane were the central initiators of it. Blane was from New York City, and I've seen Michael Hendricks around over the years. I haven't seen Blane around for years. So, I'm guessing Blane moved back to New York City, but I have no idea – absolutely none – because I never knew him personally. I think a bunch of people, and this is an impression... I feel a bunch of people who were in Réaction SIDA probably ended up in ACT UP Montreal. I feel that maybe some of the core people in Réaction SIDA were probably those who were the people who did not. But, I think, there were probably other people who did, who thought it was a fine thing, which as you know, this is often something... Organizations often form out of complex dynamics and even in some cases for questionable reasons, but people join and do fantastic things in those organizations ... The origins don't necessarily have anything to do with the results.

GK: Do you have any sense of how this ACT UP group would have made decisions or some of the things they might've done over the years, or how long it would've lasted?

KS: My impression is it lasted a few years. I've been looking through press clippings. Clearly they were active doing a bunch of good things. I think one of the things they probably provided was not so much as ACT UP Montreal, but ACT UP Montreal may have been a vehicle for some people who ended up part of the Table de concertation des lesbiennes et des gais du Québec. So, I think it might have on the one hand served a function as an activist group, on the other hand served a function as a kind of relay in time until this next wave of queer activism, which started with Sex Garage and all of that, which ACT UP definitely was part of ... My impression was it flowed into it; definitely the photo – which I don't know how representative it is, but it's the photo that always sticks in my mind from the demonstration I was not at around Sex Garage – you see the big banner saying "No Police Violence" and the big banner saying "ACT UP Montreal."

GK: Yeah. I've seen it too. So, the year after the AIDS conference is actually a really major year in terms of political events with the Polytechnique (the anti-feminist 'Montreal massacre' of women at École Polytechnique) and the next summer the Oka crisis, and the Sex Garage raid. Would a lot of the people from Réaction SIDA have been involved in different ways in those types of activities.

KS: Yeah. I mean around the Polytechnique, I was super-aware of it, but super-, super-, super-peripheral to it. I wasn't living in Montreal, you know. My impression is that it was a lot of very intense stuff, like in the hours and days afterwards, and that some of the people who I've been describing as core members or leadership or whatever of Réaction SIDA definitely did put energy into dealing with that. Regarding Sex Garage also, I definitely think that – I mean I'm one hundred percent sure – some of those core members who'd been in Réaction SIDA were involved with, I think it was called Lesbians and Gays against Violence. And I mean, in retrospect – it happened the year after, but my impression would've been that it was many years later – but, you know, that's where they would've reconnected in a sense with the guys who'd been doing ACT UP. But again, I wasn't in Montreal at the time, so I was slightly distant and these are guesses.

Regarding the Mohawk solidarity stuff, it's interesting because I mean, the Quebec left overwhelmingly was just absent or worse than absent during all of that. So what you had was a whole bunch of informal initiatives, which ended up taking on a significance which they wouldn't have had the organized left been playing a more appropriate role. And my impression is that, some of the people might've been a part of some informal stuff. And my impression was that definitely some of the people would've been going to those demonstrations and things like that, which because so much was informal ... You know, just the fact of going to those demonstrations, that was significant because most people weren't doing that. Montreal is a city where progressive demonstrations have repeatedly had more than 100,000 participants, and yet from my admittedly crappy memory, during the Oka standoff pro-Mohawk demonstrations in the city were at largest maybe barely a thousand, sometimes only hundreds. And there wasn't much else to plug into, other than the one organization that was created at the time and that ended up doing a lot of good work, the Regroupement de solidarité avec les Autochtones, but I don't know if anyone from Réaction Sida was involved in that group. But yeah, very informal is what I would say.

But I remember there was a giant march, I think it was described as a peace march, called out at Oka, so outside of Montreal, and people came from across North America. And by "peace," they were basically in solidarity with the Warriors and with the Mohawk nation. I remember it was the same day as that demo that I didn't get to in Montreal, because it was clear I was going to go to either one or the other. We even, I remember, you may forget [referring to his partner], but we had big arguments – "which one should we go to?" It got really heated! ... And, I think, although in retrospect, it was the wrong position, I was favour of going to the Montreal one, and you [referring to his partner] were in favour of going to the pro-Mohawk one. Although, we were both in favour of both. And I remember being surprised to see some people who'd been core members of Réaction SIDA had chosen also to go to that "peace" demo, rather than go to what would end up being the historic big queer demonstration in Montreal.

GK: Right. So, that's one of the demonstrations organized after Sex Garage?

KS: Yeah. I think it's the July 30 one. ... But there were also people at the peace camp, which was a camp of hundreds of people that spontaneously was set up just outside the Canadian Army's perimeter at Oka. The peace camp was weird, a mix of people including white hippies and activists and Indigenous folks from across the continent and probably loads of police and army infiltrators... But, like I said, informal things just took the day. So, it was like a camp of all kinds of folks with all kinds of weird stuff going on.

GK: So, some of the stuff that comes out of the resistance to Sex Garage... I mean obviously there's narrowly defined gay things that come out of it, but is there any sort of sustained organizing around police violence? You were mentioning a group called Gays and Lesbians Against Violence.

KS: Well, there was Lesbians and Gays Against Violence... but I'm sketchy on the details. ... and, I wasn't in town. ... But there definitely was stuff around police violence. All things flowed together. That's one of the things that to me is really striking remembering all of this – I don't know how things happened in other cities, but I would be shocked if Montreal was unique in this respect – it

wasn't like this to everyone, but to me and to other people, you know, these weren't different issues or different organizations. We were the same bunch of friends who'd end up at these different demos and they weren't separate things; they were all part of the same thing. Like, those two people I'd told you about who had blown my mind coming through town with those safer sex flyers and zines from the Queer Anarchist Network, the year before the AIDS conference, so 1988. I remember seeing one of them at this weird peace camp outside Oka in 90, and he was like, "Yeah, you know, for the first time in my life I can imagine armed struggle happening in Canada." That was a positive thing. On another front, there'd been a series – as there always are, nothing new – of police killings in Montreal, of young Black men ... Like, in the consciousness of the people who were marching around Sex Garage, that was not disconnected. Many of them were also attending or even helping to organize in support of protests against those killer cops. It wasn't like, "Well, this is our gay issue ..." You know what I mean? To some people maybe it was, but to many people it wasn't. It was like "This is all the same thing" or different parts of the same thing. My memory may be crappy on many details, but about this I am sure it is not just my own subjective lens of looking at how people experience struggle.

I think that there was a demographic shift in the Montreal left around then. My impression was that prior to those years, the Montreal left itself was much more white. And that this was just a reflection of how white Montreal was, and how that was changing. So in those years the Montreal left, especially the anglo left, but mirroring the rest of the city, became less white. And so racism was not necessarily a separate issue from homophobia for people. It wasn't like, "I'm gay, so I'm obviously white." That wasn't the case; not that it ever had been, but it became even less so. And so in theory and also in people's lives, opposing racism and opposing homophobia weren't necessarily separate issues.

At the same time, there was – and at the time I think, my understanding of this would've been completely uncritical – but there was a lot of hype around the murders of gay men in Montreal and there was talk that there was maybe a serial killer. On one occasion, it was neo-nazis who'd killed a gay man – Yves Lalonde, I think, in Angrignon Park. So in terms of activism, there was this focus on societal violence and parallel to this there was this police violence thing, and this created a situation whereby for some people, what came out of that was an anti-police politics, and a series of radicalizations; while for some other people, what came out of this was an idea of, "Well, the police are bad for two reasons: they're beating us up and they're not doing their job properly because they are not protecting us from homophobes." So, there became this focus of, "We have to reform the police." Both, I think, came out of Sex Garage and co-existed for some time – at times probably coexisted in the same individuals' consciousness – because until the police start playing by the rules, those reform-oriented demands can also seem really militant and radical, not to mention necessary. And it would've probably been like – you know, I'm guessing – '93-'94. I remember this group had been set up, the Table de concertation des lesbiennes et des gais du Québec. And they'd been set up for a bunch of reasons, but basically as an umbrella of all of the different gay and lesbian and queer "official" organizations – like, as a lobby. But no one talked about non-profit industrial complexes or anything like that back then. So, you know, it seemed like potentially a very good thing, because they were criticizing the cops, even though their criticism was the cops aren't doing their job properly. I remember being friendly with some of the people

involved and so I tried to go to a few things – as a participant, not an organizer – just because I thought, “Well, this is an important place to be.” And you [referring to partner] came with me.

I remember they did this fucking thing about police and the community, and they had cops there to talk to people, to try and make nice... I remember it was the last time I ever did anything like that. I remember, you know – again, it wasn't like a brilliant point on my part, in fact it was kind of a stupid point on my part – my point was: I wanted to know why they put on rubber gloves before arresting and beating people at one of the demos, or arresting anyone who was queer ... And the cops said, “Well, we don't.” Which they *had* at Sex Garage, they'd put on rubber gloves and all of this, and it made them look like homophobic AIDSphobic assholes. And I thought I had my “gotcha” moment because I had been arrested recently and the cops had put on rubber gloves. And they hadn't known anything about me, but nonetheless I felt I could use this to show him up. So I said, “Well, I was arrested recently and they did.” I forget what else I said, but this guy who was like a “community leader” was in the room and he just, you know, said something like, “Oh well, that's just you...” You know what I mean??? It wasn't even up to the cop to shut me up – this guy who was “supposed to be” on our side shut me up! So, it's like, “Ah... done with that.” [laughter]

So that came out of it, and that took up a certain kind of energy. And other stuff came out of it and developed, I think, in a maybe more subterranean way. The radical politics I'm aware of came to be very concentrated around Concordia. There was all of this stuff in such rapid progression in those years. I think it was even possibly 1990 that some people, including someone, I think, who had worked on *Rites*, won a student election to be the student government at Concordia and their platform had been “Feminism Works.” I mean I wasn't one of them or anything like that, so I have no special insight, but my impression was that they looked at it like they had taken over the student government and they were going to do as much as they possibly could with this just as a vehicle for radical and radicalizing politics in Montreal. Sustainability or maintaining popularity amongst students were not priorities on their radar. So, they did a ton of stuff - to hell with the consequences and damn the torpedoes - kinds of things to do with solidarity with the Mohawk nation and also solidarity around Sex Garage, amongst other things. Those folks were really pivotal in a lot of ways, if only behind the scenes, during those years.

I think it was the first year after they got elected, they published in their student handbook, it was... I remember it as safer sex information, but a friend of mine who was more closely involved told me recently it was actually safer sex porn, describing some encounter in the bathrooms in the Hall Building. Right away there was a real backlash from right-wing students and there was I believe a book burning right outside their offices, organized by some student group, where people burnt copies of the student handbook ... This was scary, a heavy situation.

So definitely out of all of that Sex Garage stuff, there was so much energy that just came out. Divers/Cité comes out of that. That's what Divers/Cité is commemorating in a sense. It was just this explosion.

GK: So, we're moving towards the end of the interview. I guess one of the last questions is: I mean I realize you weren't centrally involved in any sort of AIDS organizing in the 1990s, but just what was your sense of what happened in Montreal in the 1990s? I mean I guess I'm

really asking about the AIDS Service Organizations. Is there any sense you had of what was going on with them?

KS: My sense was that died down. My sense was that there wasn't that kind of AIDS activism going on. I could be completely wrong. And it could be completely a commentary on me that I didn't notice it happening. You know what I mean? But that was my sense.

GK: So, after ACT UP Montreal there wasn't anything sort of that had any of those types of characteristics.

KS: There was Queer Nation Rose, but it wasn't an AIDS activist group. It was more an anti-violence group. It was one of the things that came out of that Sex Garage explosion of energy. But in terms of AIDS activist groups, no, nothing that I'm aware of.

GK: I almost forgot about this question. A little bit later on you're actually involved with organizing around Human Life International (HLI) and the conference they held in Montreal, and clearly some of that is also AIDS related. Could you tell us about that?

KS: Human Life International was a very right wing Roman Catholic organization far to the right of the Church mainstream on every issue. And it was a very large organization. And they hold these conferences all over the place, and they were going to hold one in Montreal. My impression is that Planned Parenthood people from New York City found out about this ... So, again, it was similar to the 1989 AIDS conference in that this was a major event in Montreal and just a few years later there's this other big event and again you have people from outside the city basically saying, "Hey, something's going to be happening in Montreal, organize something around it." And that's what happened. What was different was that, in the case of the AIDS conference, we had very little on the ground, so we had this group Réaction SIDA that had formed not for the AIDS conference, but coincidentally it formed just a few months beforehand, but it was very small. With HLI, we were in a much better position because by that point in time there was a really constructive array of militant, radical left forces working together in the city. And it's very easy to organize against fascists or against people whose ideas are beyond the pale, and that's what HLI was. So, it was a perfect opportunity in that sense, the kind of thing that could bring everyone together.

A key linchpin to it all was the Comité des sans-emplois – which was kind of like OCAP (the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty) except here in Montreal – they really bottom-lined this. And I think that for myself and a few of us, our priority was on the one hand, trying to make sure that the demonstrations were as militant as possible, and on the other hand, making sure that queer issues and AIDS issues were prominent in the mix. Like, HLI's primary targets are women; they're primarily an anti-abortion organization. However, especially at that point in time, there was a feeling that homophobia and AIDS-phobia were being instrumentalized in a strategically important way by the far right. I'm not saying it's true; not saying it isn't true. That was the sense. And there was also the sense that we didn't want these issues to be forgotten. I remember that was actually a source of – not a lot - but a little bit of tension within the organizing. I mean ironically not between us and any woman, but between us and this one self-ordained anti-sexist

man who wanted to lecture us about how gay issues shouldn't really be that prominent in all of this.

But in any case, HLI came to town. It was a nice experience. I remember handing out flyers in the Gay Village. And, I think, this was the flyer [referring to a flyer] and the thing with the flyer – it was kind of done that way intentionally, so that when people got it, they weren't sure if it was a far-right flyer or a flyer about the far right. It was just these prominent quotes from people who'd be speaking at the conference about things like forcing HIV-positive people to be branded or tattooed on their faces, so that people would know to avoid them, or setting up concentration camps. When I say far right, this was that kind of far right. So, it was great the reaction we got – some people would get really angry at us, and then when we explained that we were against these fuckers, who were going to be holding a conference in Montreal, their reaction would change and be really encouraging and enthusiastic though still of course angry, but angry about HLI. We went into bars at night and we'd just hand them out. And it was complete, you know – our approach was don't set up an organization, don't go through the community groups, just reach out to people, not people in your circles but strangers, directly. Which was partly making a virtue out of necessity because me and my friends weren't in any community groups or in any one organization, but it is also still my favourite way to do this kind of thing. And we put up these posters, you know, "Wanted" or "Not Wanted: Paul Cameron," which was the name of the shrink, the most notorious shrink who'd said this vile homophobic stuff, though he was far from being the only one in HLI who'd said this kind of thing.

There was a big demonstration the first night, a really big demonstration – with a very visible queer presence, but also a visible all-kinds-of-people presence. It was great. It's funny because by today's standards it wasn't militant, but by the standards of the time it was. When the cops put up their fences people tried to push them over. People tried to push through cops. I was hit by a cop, so I guess the cops pushed us back. One person was arrested for trashing a police car and it turned out that he'd been spotted by cops who'd infiltrated the anti-HLI Coalition. And people being outraged and indignant about this infiltration and arrest actually marks the formation of a group, a collective, that was at first called the Citizens Opposed to Police Brutality – later on they changed to Collective Opposed to Police Brutality – and which became an incredibly important factor in the development of the Montreal radical left over the next twenty years. And indirectly it came out of this anti-HLI organizing.

There was also a queer demo against HLI, which we had the next day, where hundreds of people came out, which was very effective, very successful. And again, the same as I said with the AIDS conference, where the cops just backed off – when you're going forward, you suddenly realize that they've decided to not stop you – it was like that. I remember we were walking, the cops said, "No further." But they kept on backing off. They figured as long as you don't storm the hotel – the Radisson, where the conference was happening – they'd let you do whatever you want outside. So, it was really good. In the end, Paul Cameron ended up not being allowed into the country because once the media got a hold of the things that he'd said, he was barred for whatever reason. And Randall Terry also wasn't allowed in, who was one of the other speakers for similar reasons. Because, although he's best known as the founder of Operation Rescue, he's also on record about being in favour of the death penalty for gays and all of this.

But, in terms of the consequences of the choices people make... remember there were those more “realistic”, conservative, whatever, folks who’d come out of all of various things including that explosion of energy after Sex Garage ... they’d set up their Tables de concertations ... they were predominantly male, I believe 100 percent white at that point, and they constituted Montreal’s official or unofficial gay activist milieu or committee leadership or whatever. I remember they were... Somebody told me... I don’t know if it was at the Alternative Bookstore, the Comité des sans-emplois, or whoever, but they said “We’ve been getting phone calls from them. They want to know who organized the queer demo.” It was beyond them that people could’ve organized a queer demo and it wasn’t them who had anything to do with it. And they were welcome, but they were welcome just like anyone else was welcome. And it’s, you know... They didn’t end up being able to hook into any of the anti-police stuff that came out of that in a meaningful way because what was happening in the demos against HLI – the approach was that as militant as people want to be, that’s great. You know what I mean? The approach was really different from their approach, and so while their approach yielded certain achievements, it’s not like our approach went nowhere. I mean it’s not that they missed the boat. They were on their boat; we were on our boat. But, you know, we were on our boat and as a result, interesting things did happen.

GK: So, the remaining questions are that part of what we’re trying to do is also to remember people who have passed away – activists or people living with AIDS or HIV infection during this period of time. And we’re actually going to construct little memorial sections for people under the “City” headings on the website. So, is there anyone that you remember who would’ve died in this period? You’ve already mentioned Pierre...

KS: Yeah. Well, I mean Pierre’s the person who I am the most grateful to be able to mention because, you know, not being a part of the left, I’m not sure where else I would... He died in either 1991 or 1992 in Port Cartier. I received a letter from another prisoner just saying, “I thought you should know.” And I phoned the prison the next day and they confirmed it ... There being no Réaction SIDA at the time, and me for whatever reason not being a part of ACT UP, there was no collective structure to say, “Hey, this happened. Can you help?” So, you know, as far as I’m concerned, I’m still not sure how he died, under what circumstances. Nothing would surprise me. So, yeah, I’m glad to be able to mention him. That’s it.

GK: How about Windi?

KS: Windi was a gay street musician, an anarchist, and just someone with very radical politics, which he tried to integrate into his life to a degree that most people in this society just don’t. He died of AIDS in 1993, though he had moved to the west coast some time before. I was thinking about Windi, but I was thinking you should do Windi proper justice and talk to people who knew him better. Or else direct people to this webpage which has been put up to remember him:
<http://www.kersplebedeb.com/windiearthworm/>

GK: Okay, so the remaining questions are: we always give people a space if there’s something that has arisen as we’ve been talking, and as I’ve been asking questions, that you feel like you haven’t had an opportunity to talk about, this is your chance.

KS: One thing I'd like to share, as a very general observation, of someone who joined the radical left in the 80s. It really felt to me that there had been a distance separating gay men from the radical left, that there had been bad blood or something. Gay men were supposed to be sexist, materialistic, etc. They all liked porn and objectifying people, god forbid! Lesbians on the other hand were supposed to be very radical with very good politics, no matter what. And then there were disagreements about trans people, bisexual people, and others. Painting in super broad strokes here, but you get the idea. When AIDS became "*the* political issue" – which for a while it seemed to be – I had the impression that all of that changed. Struggle and real people reconfigured things. Suddenly there seemed to be much more space for gay men on the left, and much less hostility or defensiveness. Suddenly trans issues were being taken seriously, or more seriously. And conversely, perhaps, hopefully, there was less sexism amongst gay men, though of that I am less sure. But partially at least, a gap seemed to be bridged. And this is part of what laid the groundwork for what in retrospect was a really rapid queer advance, both on the left and then in mainstream society as well. It's not as linear as to say that *Ellen* coming out in 1997 was foreshadowed by queer anarchist punk kids writing zines in the early 90s which were foreshadowed by AIDS activists in the streets in the late 80s, and I really doubt that is what happened causally, but on the level of appearances those were the surface phenomenon.

As for this interview, speaking to you, I felt I could either stick to what I *knew* was accurate, or I could tell you what I *thought* was the case. I decided that it would be more useful for you probably if I did the latter, and you or others would just have to take it for what it is, as someone's memories and impressions, not necessarily an ironclad or even accurate historical account. In fact certainly not. So I want to stress again that while all of this oral history stuff is always very subjective, in my case it's particularly so because I was very young, and so I'm sure there's not only time, but there's also just the distortions of not necessarily fully understanding contexts when I was in them. So, it should just be taken that way.

GK: Sure. But on the other hand, you've also given us great amounts of information and insight, so that's also important. Thank you for the interview because this was really wonderful.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]