

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Caroline Pinto, Class of 2004

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 16, 2014

Abstract

Caro Pinto begins the interview by remembering positive interactions with Smith alumnae that led her to apply. She discusses the queer community at Smith, the “politically correct” culture, and the political climate of the college. Pinto speaks positively about controversies at Smith and reflects on how the conversations that came out of controversies were helpful for many. She also chronicles her time at Smith in relationship to major national events such as the Bush v. Gore election and 9/11. Pinto ends the interview by discussing her career path in archival work after Smith.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Pinto, Caroline. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Caroline Pinto, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Pinto, Caroline. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Caroline Pinto, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

CAROLINE PINTO
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

RAMSAY: This is Grace Ramsay and I'm conducting an interview with Caro Pinto, class of 2004, on May 16th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to participate and come out on reunion. So what's it like being back?

PINTO: Well, it's funny because I like actually live in Northampton and I work at Mount Holyoke so I'm always walking by the college. But my sense of being here in the context of reunion is entirely different. You know, I was hanging out in my class headquarters in Talbot last night and just talking to people, and it was sort of the energy level when you're sort of immersed in the community of people is entirely different. And I was struck by how everything sounded when the door was opening and closing. And that sort of like cadence of sounds was like such a hallmark of living at Smith and sort of hanging out in the living room and all those kinds of like casual conversations, but you know, sort of the physicality of the structures like come to new life for me being here with my classmates as opposed to when I'm here for a meeting or walking to the bus or walking into town. So it's – people are like, Well, it's old hat for you, you live here. However, it's really different sort of being with the energy level of the people that I knew when I was eighteen to twenty-two.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So what brought you here to Smith in the first place, led you here?

PINTO: (laughs) I, so my joke is like, well, obviously I wanted an excellent liberal arts education, but I went to a really kind of close-minded high school where women weren't encouraged to be smart. You couldn't be sort of smart and heard and respected. And I was queer but I wasn't out. That would have not gone well for me in high school. And I really didn't enjoy being in high school. I loved my school and I loved like classes and learning and I was really nerdy, but I really wanted something different for myself in college and I had the opportunity to attend this like summer nerd camp at Wellesley. I didn't know what women's colleges were. It's like, what? This sounds pretty great.

And I didn't really have any role models. You know, it's like you go to the library and read about like lesbians and queer people. Of course, we didn't like call them queer in my mind in 1998. But it seemed kind of sad and I was really excited about the idea of maybe college could be this different community.

But anyways, when I went to this camp at Wellesley I met some Smithie counselors. And for the first time I was like, wait a minute. Like I could be like these people when I'm nineteen. You know, this is something to like aspire to be. They're cool, they're collected, they're articulate, they're smart, they're doing something they love, and there's this fearlessness about them. So I went on a college tour with one of the counselors. It was in the summer and there was no one around but from the time we got to Main Street, Northampton, she was like cheering about getting to Smith and you know, like living in a community where I grew up where I wasn't excited to be there, I wasn't excited about the people, you know I was really struck by her excitement and her passion and I wanted to go to a place that people felt that strongly about.

So I started learning about Seven Sisters and I toured some of the other ones. But you know it's the funny thing that happens when you meet alumnae — and I grew up near Worcester, Massachusetts, and there's a pretty active Smith Club. And I went to this tea and I met women in their eighties and they were still as excited about Smith, that excitement was as palpable as that — God, she was probably nineteen or twenty — that twenty-year-old counselor, and I was like, I want to go to a place that I feel that excited about when I'm eighty as when I'm twenty. I want that. And so that really propelled me to apply and come here.

RAMSAY: So when you got here did you find the queer community sort of —

PINTO: Yeah, it was pretty instant. (laughter) Instant. I mean I think it's one of those things that people talk about, it's, there's a lot of things happening. You know, you're eighteen and you're trying to figure so much else out about yourself like, I'm at college. Should I be studying this? Should I be studying that? Who do I want to be? What do I want to do? And so people were sort of, are coming to consciousness or on different journeys that are in really different places. And you know, sort of in those moments where you're feeling really self-conscious about yourself and like you know, oh, here I am, I'm queer and I've cut my hair and I look this certain way. I'm kind of grappling with these issues. I think there are like a lot of really instructive debates and conversations that happened around sexuality, which are sometimes really comfortable and really empowering and really supportive, but there are also conversations that, you know, it's like you really start dealing with issues of privilege and you're really dealing with intersectionality and you're really reading the theory and you're really seeing that, you know, for some people, they're here and, you know, dating women happens to

be part of their experience and they leave and dating women sort of ceases.

So that's something for people to grapple with. And there's some people that are like very dismissive of that. And in sort of low ebb moments for me, I was like you know oh, you know, they were lucky to do that and here I am. But I've read more theory and I'm old now, you know, I'm 32 and old. And sort of, I'm better able to sort of see the complexity of what the queer community can look like and sort of issues of inclusivity and exclusivity and, you know, the role that visibility can play and sort of privileges I have within queer spaces, but then sort of in the wide world grappling with the fact that you know there's that level of difference that I've always felt like I've had to compensate for, you know.

For me, I made this deal with myself when I was seventeen, I was like, Look, if you're going to be out and you're going to be visible, you have to work twice as hard, you have to be twice as prepared, you have to be twice as smart. Because it was like in my mind, and it's unfortunately borne out to be true, you're going to be discriminated against. Like people are going to say things to you, you're going to be judged differently because of how you look and how you are, so you just have to be ready for it.

And I think what Smith gave me was this opportunity to really kind of fall apart and fail in so many different ways but learn how to kind of become a resilient person who's able to kind of put the pieces back together and realize that like you can do anything. And that you know setbacks, as difficult as they can be, you know I can recover from them and kind of continue on my march. But my mantra's always been you know: Be twice as prepared, work twice as hard, be twice as smart. And Smith gave me that opportunity to develop those skills to kind of be in the workplace and I've been lucky. I mean there are other people that have experienced things that have been like far more trying than what I've experienced, but I really go back to that: Twice as smart, work twice as hard, be twice as prepared.

RAMSAY: Do you have a favorite memory?

PINTO: Yeah. It's like an amalgam of them. (laughs) It's – so I rowed crew for two years and so, you know, a lot of time at the gym. And so you always want to be back in time for dinner, 5:30 or 5:45, whatever time it was. And I always had this memory of it's always fall, the sun is like always like just set and it's sort of dusky but kind of dark. And I'm so tired from having worked out and I'm really hungry, but, and I'm walking towards Northrop and the gates there. I forgot what they're called. They probably have a name and I don't know them, but I'm like, the gates. And I'm walking past it and it's this simultaneous feeling of just like being entirely grateful that I get to be here and do these things and develop myself but also that amazing, tired feeling of just like I knew I was pushing myself to the max in every context of my life. And

it was just this moment that I would always take for myself before I'd go and eat dinner and you know, do work and all the other things that came next, that it was just a private moment that I had for myself every time I did it, of just being hyper-aware of like how ephemeral it all – all is here and just being entirely amazed that I got to do this, like how few people get to do this? So that's my favorite memory.

RAMSAY: That's really great. So do you have time for a couple more questions?

PINTO: Cool.

RAMSAY: I guess, I was wondering, so obviously Smith has this sort of tradition of (laughs) we have a lot of traditions that have made a lot of controversies too, and there's a lot happening right now with the commencement speaker.

PINTO: Yeah.

RAMSAY: I'm sure you've heard about that. So I was wondering if there are any sort of – any time – any moments of your time here that were marked by controversy or what those–

PINTO: Yeah. The gender-neutral pronoun controversy. But I think actually controversy is what makes Smith amazing. I think it's sort of having that opportunity that people care so much and so deeply and are so thoughtful about things that they're debated and discussed with an energy and intensity that I've never experienced anywhere else. But the gender, the gender-neutral constitution, I'm not articulating exactly what it was–

RAMSAY: The SGA?

PINTO: The SGA rewriting of the constitution, that was a huge controversy while I was here. And of course, I mean I was here from 2000 to 2004, so you know my first year it was the — well, depending on your perspective, the stolen presidential election, or the landmark *Bush v. Gore* case, that was a rough first election. My sophomore year, you know, 9/11 happened, and so my junior year the United States invaded Iraq and so began a pretty intense decade of warfare, and then there was a recession my senior year that pretty much stagnated until the great crash of 2008. So you know, the political context was very much the '90s were over and you know, this whole new world began. So a lot of political controversies were popping up, you know, liberal versus conservative, bastion of liberalism, conservatives not having voices. But you know again, I think that's what's really strengthened me, that I'm not afraid of controversy, because we always, we always dealt with it, we always talked about it, even if it felt hard. I think that's one of the

most powerful things about Smith. I think controversy is one of the greatest things about being a Smithie. We don't shy away from that.

RAMSAY: That's true. (laughs) So how would you describe the political climate at the time, with all of that happening here?

PINTO: You know, I think like one of the words that kind of comes to mind but is more of the milieu of the '90s probably, political correctness, I think you know sort of like people were – so that unfortunate thing happens when you're trying to be mindful of people's feelings, but you're also aware that you have a political point of view. So I think people were grappling with like, How do I say what I mean without offending anyone? And so by doing that in some ways you're not offending anyone, therefore saying nothing. So it was sort of like you know, oh, I identify this way, I identify that way. But in a number of my classes I actually had a lot of outspoken, conservative people and some of them were like, I am under siege. And you know other people being like, But in the world you're not under siege, you're the majority. And so I think people were just really trying to figure out how to have political convictions and a political point of view and articulating it in a way that was both respectful, but also making their point across and making a strong argument. I mean I think that's what eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds are trying to do. You have all these feelings. You have all these thoughts. But you don't really know how to edit them.

I work with college students now all the time, so that's you know one of the things I'm always saying, it's like, Your identity is everywhere and everything and you just don't know how to kind of sort through – how to edit that, so I think the political climate was a lot of people trying to make sense of a lot of seismic changes happening. I mean I think 9/11 was a game-changer, that ushered in an entirely different period of time. I majored in history so I'm like, we don't know, really, what the impact of 9/11 is quite yet, you know because it's still kind of unfolding.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm, yeah. So do you have any advice for current Smithies or graduating Smithies?

PINTO: Sage words from Caro Pinto. I don't know. I think my biggest advice is you should trust the education. You should trust that you were really, really well prepared. If you put the time into your classes and you let yourself be changed by the community here, and let yourself be challenged and sort of at times broken, broken apart by the rigorous academics, you'll be prepared for the world. I think it's really — I think there's like a lot of conversations happening about what higher education should be doing for people, and you know, I think the adage is true that Smith is preparing you for your last job, but you have to get that first one.

And I think you know keep faith, like maybe your first job out of Smith is not going to be your dream job, but don't hold onto this notion of a dream job. I think maybe a couple of years I stopped believing in this idea that I had a dream job. I think that you should just be excited to keep challenging yourself and know that your goals and your dreams are going to evolve as you age and you have different experiences, but keeping yourself open to all of them, which is a really like horrible thing to say when you're twenty-two and you're like, Oh my God, I have to be in the world and learn how to do these things and make a living. Like why are you giving me Zen master advice about being open to change and like letting your dreams evolve as the goalposts shift.

But I do think that kind of keeping that in mind and knowing that like maybe your first job isn't particularly glamorous, but be open to all the things you can learn about it and think about how you can spin that experience into something else or how you can use your time in your early twenties to do a lot of different things and keep a lot of different options open. To be open to what you can do because having gone here you can do a lot of things that a lot of other people can't.

RAMSAY: Yeah. I think that's great advice. And I think that's a good place to wrap up, if that sounds good to you.

PINTO: Great.

RAMSAY: Thank you so much again.

PINTO: Thanks.

RAMSAY: You were great.

PINTO: I think the archives concentration is super cool. (laughter) I wish it was here when I had been a student, because actually it was Praxis working here that made me go on this path of ruin toward librarianship.

GEIS [videographer]: Do you want to just talk about that for a second? So let's get that.

PINTO: Oh yeah. Oh, you'd love to hear about my path of ruin? (laughter) No, actually I have a pretty, I have a pretty sweet life. Man, I do. Yeah, so I was a history major and I, you know, so I did this weird internship program when I was in high school and I worked at the American Antiquarian Society doing like educational things. It was a long time ago so I don't remember (laughs) exactly what I did. But I came into contact with libraries and archives and then when I was here, you know, any chance I got to write a paper using primary sources here I did.

And I didn't know what I really wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to take advantage of my Praxis money, so I ended up doing a project with Nanci Young here about the history of admissions and Smith and it really kind of solidified for me that maybe working in

libraries would be a good idea. I got some great advice my junior year. You know, if you want to start graduate school and you don't necessarily want to commit to a Ph.D., just get a master's degree fast, cheap, and easy, and I did that at UMass, which I call the three years of finding myself. And I worked in archives and special collections there and you know I loved my research, obviously, and I actually did research here for my paper on lesbians and eugenics and I did a lot of research at the Schlessinger Library. And I just really found myself more interested in working with students and working with collections and thinking about issues of access and thinking about like who gets to collect what and what does it mean and how do we work with constituencies, rather than focusing on sort of my own work at that particular time.

So I went to a library school and you know speaking of being open to change, (laughs) my first job out of grad school I was primarily a processing archivist at Yale University and I quickly realized that there's just so much to librarianship and being an archivist than just working strictly with collections. So I just really, well, I felt like people were like, Well, you really need to know how to do technology, Caro, which, do technology is like really loaded. What does that mean to do technology? So I just learned more about technology and went to a THATcamp [The Humanities and Technology Camp] and really began to engage with the digital humanities, and that sort of has sent me on a completely different path, so archives are a part of my day-to-day life in terms of managing and developing digital projects, multi-modal projects with students and faculty.

But yeah, it's really shifted. But sort of my core love is being, you know, surrounded by primary source documents and, you know, how can you tell stories leveraging technology thoughtfully with primary source material? So that's been, yeah. But it started here. And so when I'm here in this building I keep remembering that I began a love of archives. And I wish that I could have done so much more with it other than writing papers about normal women and queer visibility. You know, some of these papers went much better than others but the experience of doing research here was such a luxury. I think that's, every Smithie should spend time here doing a project.

RAMSAY: I agree. (laughs) Yeah.

PINTO: So I'm jealous that you get to do the archives concentration.

RAMSAY: Thank you.

PINTO: Yeah. You're welcome. There're probably like other people you need to talk to.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs, June 2014.