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University of California
Berkeley, California

Eugene Dennis Vrana

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project

This interview series was partially funded by the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment and the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley.

Interviews conducted by
Erfan Moradi
in 2019

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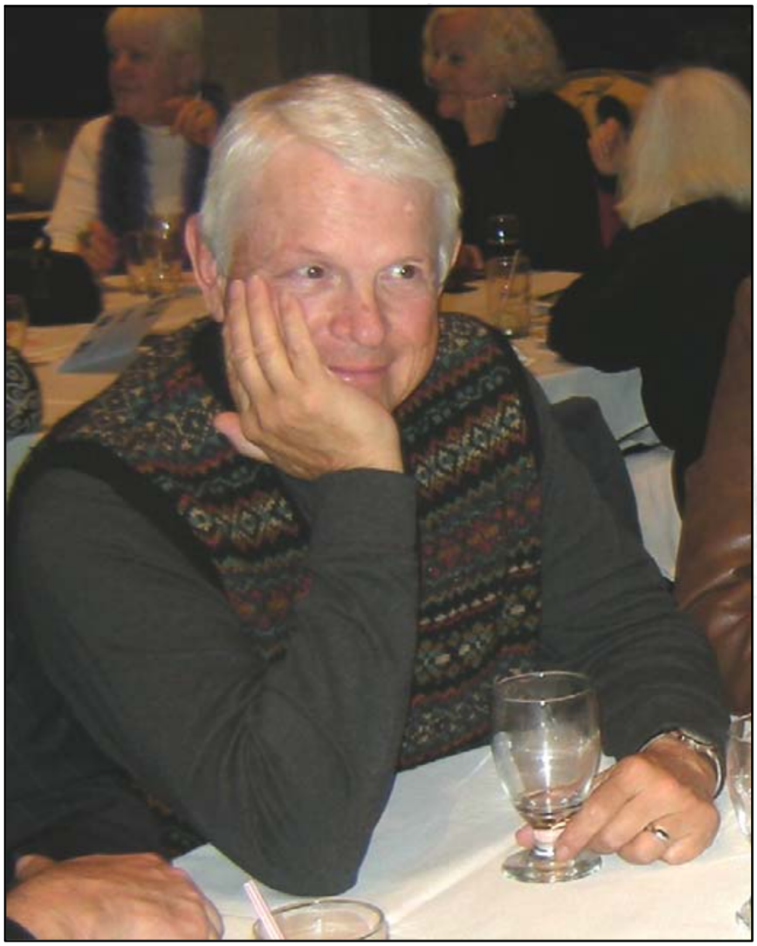
It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Vrana, Eugene Dennis. “Eugene Dennis Vrana: The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project.” Interviews conducted by Erfan Moradi in 2019. Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2021.



Eugene Dennis Vrana

Abstract

Eugene Dennis Vrana is a poet and a founding member of the Waterfront Writers and Artists. He worked as a longshoreman on the Bay Area waterfront from 1969 through 1982. In 1986 he was appointed Librarian and Archivist for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), and from 1994 until his retirement in 2010 he served as the ILWU's Director of Educational Services.

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project is a collection of interviews with founding members of the Waterfront Writers and Artists (WWA), a group of longshoremen and marine clerks in San Francisco and Oakland who, in the late 1970s, organized themselves into a working-class collective of writers, photographers, illustrators, video documentarians, and sound artists. Over the following decade, the group gave public readings up and down the west coast of the U.S. and Canada and produced a significant body of creative work, much of which grapples with the impact of containerization on waterfront work and social life. Interviews document the group's founding and early history, the artistic development of its members, its eventual dissolution, and its legacy. The group's collected artistic work is held by the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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[Audio file: Eugene_Dennis_Vrana_interview_1_July_11_2019_audio.mp3]

01-00:00:00
Moradi: Today is July 11, at 10:30[am]. I don't want to keep you too long too so let me know if and when we're getting to the time that you need to start heading out. Can you state your name for the record?

01-00:00:16
Vrana: My full name is Eugene Dennis Vrana.

01-00:00:20
Moradi: And can you tell me a little bit about where and when you were born?

01-00:00:25
Vrana: I was born in New York City in December 1942.

01-00:00:31
Moradi: And can you tell me a little bit about your family?

01-00:00:37
Vrana: My parents were leaders of the Communist Party. When I was born, my dad was General Secretary and my mother was a journalist working for the *Daily Worker* in New York.

01-00:00:54
Moradi: What were their names?

01-00:00:56
Vrana: Eugene and Peggy Dennis.

01-00:00:59
Moradi: How did they come to be involved with the Communist Party?

01-00:01:04
Vrana: From two different directions. My dad was born in Seattle in 1905 and grew up in a family that was kind of unstable and he had to go to work when he was like 12 and 13 around the waterfront. [He] got connected with the Wobblies, in terms of looking for a way to make this work life better and make some more money to support his parents — his stepmom in particular. Then the more experience he had with the Wobblies, the more he was also connected to union organizing including in Southern California, in the Imperial Valley in the 1920s and in San Pedro with the Marine Workers Industrial Union. He came to the conclusion that the Wobblies were great but that they weren't — he felt — not organized enough, structured enough, tightly disciplined enough to win what needed to be won at that time in that struggle that he was involved with. So he joined the fledgling Communist Party.

So now my mother was the daughter of Russian Jews that came to New York — in I think it was 1903 — and migrated across to Los Angeles. And that

extended family that she was part of came from a secular tradition, and there were more socialists and anarchists than there were observant Jews in that extended family. By the time she was in high school, she was finding more activity in line with her politics in the Young Communist League than any place else. So she was a member of the Young Communist League and then when she got out of high school, she participated in a Communist Party training school up in the state of Washington, and my dad was an instructor at that school, so that's how they met. Their fates were joined at that time, 1928.

01-00:4:00
Moradi: What was organizing as a leftist like back then, I mean in the context of —

01-00:04:07
Vrana: Well if you were going to be a full-time organizer in non-union territory, you were taking your life in your hands. The traditional thing was getting beaten up, and that was like nothing — getting killed, getting disappeared. That was ordinary at that time.

01-00:04:37
Moradi: Do you know if that was the case for any of their friends, comrades, colleagues?

01-00:04:44
Vrana: I never heard them say that close friends or comrades of theirs were killed, but beaten, yes. My dad was beaten several times.

01-00:04:55
Moradi: Were they on particular organizing drives?

01-00:04:59
Vrana: Yeah, well the ones I mentioned in the Imperial Valley and on the waterfront in San Pedro.

01-00:05:06
Moradi: And then when did they end up back in New York?

01-00:05:09
Vrana: Well that was a circuitous route. After 1928, they were in San Francisco for a while. And then my dad went back into organizing in agriculture in Southern California in the [Imperial] Valley and he was arrested and he jumped bail. He was going to be imprisoned under the criminal syndicalist law which would have carried a real heavy sentence. And so the Communist Party told him to leave the country, and so they sent him to Moscow, to the Comintern, to serve the communist cause from there. And at that time my mother was with their first child, Tim, who was an infant. She held on with her family for a year or so and she joined my father in Moscow, and so they were in Moscow working for and around the Comintern in other countries — South Africa, the Philippines, China.

01-00:06:37
Moradi: And what sort of work was that?

01-00:06:40
Vrana: Maintaining relationships between the new communist movements in those countries and also trying to organize the resistance to the rise of fascism in Europe. And then they came back, they were told to come back. They wanted to come back. The war was breaking out — we're in the late thirties now — and the war was breaking out and they didn't want to be in Europe.

01-00:07:12
Moradi: Would they have been at risk?

01-00:07:14
Vrana: Yes. I mean they were with people who were evacuated from Moscow. When the government of the Soviet Union was being evacuated or decentralized in order to survive, they were with those kinds of people. Anyway, they came back to the States and went to Wisconsin. My dad was a party organizer there and my mother did education work. They did not come back with my brother. My brother stayed in the Soviet Union because the route they took to come back to the States was very perilous and clandestine and there was no certainty that they would be safe. So the Soviets said that they would keep him safe, which they did.

01-00:08:09
Moradi: Do you know where he ended up?

01-00:08:11
Vrana: In Moscow — I mean outside. Ivanovo was a children's home for the sons and daughters of communist leaders from around the world. He was there until after the war. And then my parents wanted to get him, reunite with him, and the American party said "no." It would look to the rest of the world that the brainwashed child of Eugene and Peggy Dennis was infiltrating. So whoever those people were that made that decision impacted their lives for the rest of their lives. My brother was educated over there, became a highly influential academic and journalist at the highest levels of the Kremlin. My dad died when he was 61. He saw my brother briefly before he died. My brother came over with Khrushchev when Khrushchev came to the United Nations.

So it was a family that was kind of torn apart by all this. I mean the thing that kept them all together was their commitment to each other and to the cause. So that was my cauldron, the cauldron in which I was shaped.

01-00:09:48
Moradi: So they ended up in Wisconsin in the thirties, and then where did they go from there?

01-00:09:53

Vrana: New York. My dad was bumped up from being district organizer to General Secretary of the party.

01-00:10:07
Moradi: And what does that entail in terms of responsibilities?

01-00:10:11
Vrana: Well, handling the internal administrative integrity of the party, you know, functioning…but also at that time, that was the war, that was World War II and there was a very high-level relationship between the party and non-communist progressives in the Roosevelt administration. So, like I was told that my dad spent a lot of his time in Washington D.C.

01-00:10:37
Moradi: Do you know if that is the case?

01-00:10:41
Vrana: If what was the case?

01-00:10:42
Moradi: If he was in D.C. and was like mingling with D.C. politicians.

01-00:10:45
Vrana: Oh yeah.

01-00:10:49
Moradi: Wow. And what was your mom doing at that time?

01-00:10:51
Vrana: She was doing education work for the party and doing more and more writing for the *Daily Worker*.

01-00:10:58
Moradi: And the *Daily Worker* is the C.P. [Communist Party] newspaper?

01-00:11:01
Vrana: It was the C.P. newspaper.

01-00:11:04
Moradi: And so you were born in 1942, you said? What was New York like then? What was your upbringing like?

01-00:11:12
Vrana: Well I only remember my upbringing [*laughter*] after ‘45, ‘46. I just remember the feeling in the family was always that the roof was going to fall on our heads, right, because after the war was the start of the Cold War and the McCarthy era and the persecution and prosecution of communists. So it was like us against the world, never tell anybody who you are, because when people find out that other people are communists, the alleged communists lose their jobs, lose their apartments. I mean things have changed some, but there

was a long period in there when I was growing up that that's the way it was. It was that way until probably the late sixties.

01-00:12:19
Moradi: Where did you go to school? Were you in New York City?

01-00:12:23
Vrana: Yeah, I went to the Bronx High School of Science. Well at first I went to Downtown Community School which was a progressive, cooperative school, which was a wonderful place down on the East Side. Then I went to the Bronx High School of Science. And by the time I got out of high school, I was desperate to get out of New York City. I found New York City just really oppressive.

01-00:12:52
Moradi: Why was that so?

01-00:12:53
Vrana: Well it's a hell of a place to be poor, for one thing. So that's just a simple thing of being a kid and not having any money, like I didn't have a nickel to buy Drake's Devil Dogs the way my buddies did. There was always like a — because I had to walk places — like there's always an edge of physical threat. I came to San Francisco the first time in 1952.

01-00:13:35
Moradi: At 10 years old?

01-00:13:37
Vrana: At 10 years old. My dad was in prison, he had been imprisoned under the Smith Act for five years and my mother was on a speaking tour for what was called the Smith Act Families Defense Committee which was raising money to help provide amenities to those who had been imprisoned under the Smith Act and…their families who needed help. I couldn't believe San Francisco, I mean it was like a playland, especially then — there literally was a Playland at the Beach. Just how uncongested it was, how people walk down the street say[ing] "hello" to each other. And I just felt at ease here in a way I never felt in the East. So I had that in the back of my mind after coming to San Francisco that time in the summer, but I knew that at the very least I wanted to get out of New York for college.

I wasn't quite ready to come all the way to California. My parents, especially my dad, talked really respectfully about life in Wisconsin, not just what they were doing as communist organizers but just how unique Wisconsin was and the tolerance that there was. There was more tolerance for the left even if there was not an endorsement of the left in many cases, but it was not the same kind of hounding that took place in other places. And…the university itself has its own tradition of academic freedom and all that, not buying into

the Cold War cleansing of radical faculty in the same way that was happening elsewhere.

So it added up to, I was gonna get away [*laughter*]…I was gonna get away from home. You know, getting away from home, that was fine, but [also] getting away from New York, like I said, and trying something new. So that's how I got to Wisconsin.

01-00:16:22
Moradi: How did your parents feel about you getting away from home?

01-00:16:25
Vrana: Pretty good, I mean, my mom wanted to hold on to me, but that was a parental thing. My dad was encouraging me, he kept saying "You know, I don't care if you go to college or not, this would be a good place, you know," for all those reasons. But he was also encouraging my going to the Merchant Marine Academy because that, to him…he was always drawn to the sea, so that was an honorable thing to do. Probably because of him, but I've always had the same, being drawn to the sea. I did not go to the Merchant Marine Academy, but years later when I ended up on the waterfront in San Francisco, I thought "that's pretty close."

01-00:17:26
Moradi: Had he spent any time at sea?

01-00:17:30
Vrana: No. I mean, no, not as a sailor.

01-00:17:38
Moradi: And when you came to San Francisco, did you go to the ocean and see that this felt like your place?

01-00:17:47
Vrana: Actually, you know, it's interesting, it wasn't looking out at the expanse of the ocean. It was looking at the nature of the shore, especially outside of San Francisco. The rocky shore, the waves, and all that, just was more dramatic to me than the Atlantic was — except up in Maine, we used to go up to Maine in the summers with my parents.

01-00:18:13
Moradi: But it sounds like you spent a lot of time by the sea.

01-00:18:17
Vrana: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:18:19
Moradi: So you end up in Wisconsin when?

01-00:18:22
Vrana: 1960. Fall of 1960.

01-00:18:27
Moradi: And you're at [the University of Wisconsin at] Madison?

01-00:18:28
Vrana: Yeah.

01-00:18:29
Moradi: What are you studying then?

01-00:18:31
Vrana: History.

01-00:18:32
Moradi: What kinds of histories were you interested in?

01-00:18:17
Vrana: Well when I started out I was in a program…at that time it was called Integrated Liberal Studies and they gave you…in two years it met all your general ed[ucation] requirements and give you a sampling of, you know, like the various historical epochs [*laughter*]. But there were some intellectual historians in Madison and there was also the Wisconsin State Historical Society which had the archival collections of much of labor and the left at that time. So the resources were there to easily do certain kinds of research, you know. So getting back, this Integrated Liberal Studies program didn't give me much leeway for the first two years, but then I was able to — in the junior year — to grab the courses I wanted to take. I ended up double majoring in history — U.S. history since 1865 — and cultural anthropology because I found the methodologies of cultural anthropology were close to the ways that I wanted to do comparative studies of workers, comparing within different industries, geographical comparisons, historical comparisons, stuff like that.

01-00:20:00
Moradi: Were there specific workers in specific places that you were most interested in?

01-00:20:10
Vrana: I was looking more at those connected with maritime, but I was taking any… [*laughter*] you know, whatever came. I remember I had a part time job for a while at the State Historical Society as a low-level clerk doing initial processing of a collection that had come in from the International Harvester company and —

01-00:20:38
Moradi: Woah.

01-00:20:39
Vrana: — which is what I said, I said "woah," [*laughter*]. And I'm sitting in this room with hundreds of boxes, you know, and I have a very simple task which is to go through them, identify paper that's damaged and needs conservation,

remove rubber bands and rusted paper clips and all that — these documents were very carefully filed, but to make sure that the dates on the folders corresponded to the dates of the materials. So that's what I started doing. And then I started looking at what it was that I was handling. And so I'm handling the correspondence of the highest levels of the International Harvester company, just after the turn of the century, where they're discussing amongst each other — I swear to God this is true — they're discussing how to turn different ethnicities and nationalities of immigrant workers against each other to circumvent the new unions that were being formed.

01-00:21:43
Moradi: That is cartoonishly evil! [*laughter*]

01-00:21:45
Vrana: Yeah, so I said, "well this is it." This is the thing I mentioned when we were talking before the machine started to record us, was that I felt that… I just lost my train of thought… Oh! about what is it that I always wanted to do that I hadn't done. Well, that moment that I just described of finding that letter and some other piece of correspondence, this to me was the priority. You know, like any historian could walk in the door and read this stuff and do what they will, but if that document is not saved and even in the description arrangement and description of the collection [is not] spotlighted, nobody would ever know about it. That history would be lost. That moment, that's where I felt that calling, but I just went off down other roads, whatever. But I got back to it, that's part of how I had felt working at the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] library.

01-00:23:00
Moradi: When did you finish your studies at Madison?

01-00:23:05
Vrana: Well let's see, I actually… I finished my undergraduate in the spring of '64 but I didn't get my degree. I got accepted to graduate school for a master's in anthropology. I had an incomplete, and without taking care of that incomplete, they let me start graduate school. And then I got into union organizing and got put off by genetics which I had to take for cultural anthropology, so [because of] the excitement of organizing and the difficulties of dealing with genetics, I hung it [my undergraduate studies] up. So the point is I didn't complete my degree. Years later, about three years later I finished that incomplete and got my degree, I think it was conferred in '67, and then right after that is when I went to Cal. It was going to be — I mean, US history since '65 — but it was going to be labor history.

01-00:24:30
Moradi: Just to step back, you said you were doing union organizing in Madison? What was that like? What were you doing?

01-00:24:37

Vrana: Well there were a couple of us that were connected with [the W.E.B.] Du Bois Club of America. It was a quasi-C.P.-but-not-really youth organization at that time, and we were on the campus and we were off the campus, we had students and some non-students. Coca-Cola was expanding and they had a really large bottling facility and distribution facility, so it was possible to get work, which I needed. The Teamsters were trying to organize and... I'm just trying to recall. There was a bar not far away, so you know we would go to work, work our shifts, and then get a bunch of people to go to the bar and talk union. I got fired from Coke for lying on my application — which I did do.

01-00:26:03
Moradi: What did you lie about?

01-00:26:04
Vrana: I don't remember, I think it was, I had taken a one-day job at a cannery out in California and parlayed it into like a year [*laughter*]. "[*imitating employers*:] There's no record of you having been there." So, anyway, then I was doing — not from the inside — but doing organizing from the outside.

01-00:26:38
Moradi: So did the Teamsters end up surviving at the Coca-Cola plant?

01-00:26:42
Vrana: Not that time, a couple years later. But I loved it.

01-00:26:52
Moradi: Was that your first taste of hands-on union organizing?

01-00:26:56
Vrana: No! Actually when I was sixteen, I was working at a summer camp, well it was a mix of a children's camp and an adult resort in upstate New York. We had some issues about the way we were being treated by the left-wing management [*laughter*]. The workforce at this place was a mix of African-American college students from the South and some high school kids like myself and some local people. [In] my recollection it was pretty large — I mean to me it was — it would be fifty people or something like that. Anyway, when we met to talk about what we were gonna do and we had to put together a group, then they wanted me to be the spokesperson for the group at the age of sixteen.

01-00:28:00
Moradi: Holy shit, what a responsibility.

01-00:28:02
Vrana: Yeah, I don't know how — I mean right I'm kind of amazed that I did it, I mean that I said yes. But there was also a way… I mean, I had been doing a lot of politics on my own. I say on my own, I mean my parents were sometimes a little circumspect about what I was doing, they didn't want me to get into trouble. But on the other hand, they wanted me to — especially my

dad — wanted me to try on different politics, different ideologies, religions, he wanted me to go to different churches. Figure it out, find out about it, make up your mind about what you believe.

01-00:28:45
Moradi: And what sort of things did you get a taste of?

01-00:28:49
Vrana: Well I was aware during the fifties — so that's like my high school years — during the McCarthy years that there was more comfort around people like the Quakers, and the Unitarians, and some faith-based organizations like the Pacifists, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which at that time was also starting to overlap with the burgeoning Civil Rights Movements. So there was a lot of civil liberties, civil rights, marches against fascism in Spain… Meanwhile, "you wanna see what mass is like at St. Patrick's Cathedral, go on, they've got pretty windows."

01-00:29:47
Moradi: Did you end up becoming a church-going type?

01-00:29:51
Vrana: Later in life, just briefly because it was a Unitarian church that was a center for activities in the place I was living at the time, but that was brief.

01-00:30:08
Moradi: So, come the late sixties, you are in Madison looking to go where?

01-00:30:17
Vrana: After Madison?

01-00:30:18
Moradi: Yeah.

01-00:30:19
Vrana: I was pretty sure I was going to come to San Francisco, I wasn't really looking for any place else. And by that time I wanted to do — I didn't know if I wanted to work at a regular industrial job but I also was getting more into writing and journalism. I had an occasional column in the University of Wisconsin student paper and I enjoyed that, and I enjoyed engaging in that level or arena of debate and discussion. I knew several people in San Francisco who worked at the *People's World*, that was the Communist Party newspaper on the West Coast. It was not controlled by the party in the way that the *Daily Worker* was, and there were staff people that were not communists, so it wasn't like a house organ in the same way. But they were covering issues — and contrary to the *Daily Worker*, there was more live reporting, they would cover demonstrations and all that, do feature stories on whatever. So I put in my bid to get on the staff and I made it, so I worked there a couple years.

Then what happened, ironically — this is like 1965, '66 — was I started…two things started to happen: I was around a lot of the Stop the Draft demonstrations. I was covering them for the paper, and the Black Panthers, the rise of the Black Panthers and the imprisonment of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. I was like right there when heads were getting busted and all that kind of stuff, and it just bothered me to be on the periphery, to be on the outside, not being engaged. I mean that was part of the professional posture of the journalists is to not be in it, but to be recording it, reporting and recording…

01-00:32:44
Moradi: But you wanted to be in it.

01-00:32:46
Vrana: Yeah, which is how, that's how I took the route to go back to graduate school because I felt that the best contribution I could make was to be teaching and that's what I was going to do. So that's what I did. I went to work for *People's World* for a couple years, and I went to Cal for that year of '68, '69, and September of '69 I started on the waterfront.

01-00:33:21
Moradi: What drew you to the waterfront? How did you get your start there?

01-00:33:26
Vrana: Well, I knew a lot of longshoremen, and the culture of the union was part of my family. My aunt was on the general strike committee [in 1934]. There was some reference, wink wink, to my dad and Harry Bridges having some kind of political relationship, but the point is that it was all intimate in a family sense, a cultural sense, a political sense. And it was appealing to me more and more to be doing industrial work and then let my other interests to be outside of that, or if it was connected, it would be work in the union kind of thing, but I would have a base that was not in academia or not in some other student-youth cultural kind of thing but in the real world.

01-00:34:45
Moradi: What were your feelings towards academia at that point? Were you growing frustrated at all?

01-00:34:50
Vrana: Yeah, I was feeling, you know there is so much turmoil on the campuses that I cared about, there was so much turmoil and that a lot… There was a lot of melodrama, on both sides, both in terms of the faculty, even those whose political sympathies were anti-war, you know, [for] civil rights, and everything else, but they didn't want it upsetting what was happening in the way the university was run, and who got to be at the university, and where the university invested its money.

01-00:35:37

Moradi: And this was the time of the loyalty oaths, weren't they? Or was it a little bit after?

01-00:35:42
Vrana: It was a little bit after, but loyalty oaths, it was just a little bit after. I mean, it all tied together, I can remember when I was graduating high school I refused to sign the loyalty oath in New York and I was denied graduation, so I said "well, fuck you." So I go into the [American] Civil Liberties Union, and we had a big case, we hit the headlines.

01-00:36:08
Moradi: No kidding.

01-00:36:09
Vrana: Yeah. And there was another student who joined with me, we did it together. My mother was really worried [*laughter*]. I said, "I'm already in the University of Wisconsin, I don't need my diploma." But I'm just saying, so in my personal life, going from 1960, loyalty oath, over the next years, just like you said the loyalty oath for faculty and all that, it was more hot. I think it was more in appellate courts in the late sixties, I think it had gotten out of the spotlight. My chronology may be wrong.

01-00:37:01
Moradi: Sure. But so that meant that your professors and some of the folks in positions of power would have been shy to support you, right?

01-00:37:12
Vrana: Yeah, that's what it seemed like. And as I found out, the closer I got to doing things like graduate school, teaching, and all that, I could see how much faculty relies on grants and who controls the grants and how you get the grants and [all] the way pressures are exerted through that [the grants system] adversely affected a lot of people.

01-00:37:40
Moradi: Were there a lot of students who you were organizing with, or did you find that students weren't getting organized?

01-00:37:49
Vrana: I was not really comfortable on the campus. I mean I felt that were was so much rhetorical splendor without thinking about the consequences. I went so quickly from being on the Cal campus to being on the waterfront, and then I went back to the campus for some of the anti-draft activities, and at some of the meetings, some of the steering committee meetings for Stop the Draft week, these people would point at me — and I wasn't the only longshoremen there — "you guys need to shut down the waterfront, shut down the waterfront, if you don't shut down the waterfront you're a fucking coward." [*laughter*] Easy for you to say, who's paying for your rent? The notion of what it means for workers to be engaged in struggle, you know, it just really annoyed me. I myself had been, as a student, in my own privileged position.

But to see it coming that way, I was so much more at home discussing issues around the war with coworkers on the job than with students.

01-00:39:19
Moradi: Can we step back a little bit and talk about your aunt and how she got involved in the '34 strike?

01-00:39:26
Vrana: She was a union organizer. She had been a leader for the California Young Communist League, and that was in Southern California. And then she moved to San Francisco in the twenties and was a union organizer for the garment workers, and she was, in that capacity — I don't know exactly the chronology, I got the contours of it — but the point is she was connected with the garment workers at the time of the '34 general strike, and she was on the general strike committee which is where she got to know Bridges.

01-00:40:11
Moradi: And do you ever remember her talking about the strike?

01-00:40:15
Vrana: No.

01-00:40:17
Moradi: Did you hear stories filtering through the family or hear your parents talk about that strike?

01-00:40:23
Vrana: In an apocryphal kind of way, not in terms of details or, you know, rehashing factional arguments, I mean that was not happening. But there were, I mean Bridges, and at that time he was married to Nikki, Noriko Bridges, and he [Bridges] would be over at my aunt's house and Lou Goldblatt would be over there — another leader of the ILWU — and his family, and I would just be a fly on the wall, I mean I was in my early twenties at that point, maybe a little younger for a couple of earlier visits. So having these people around and listening to their point of view…but none of it was in the realm of recounting the '34 strike.

01-00:41:26
Moradi: Do you remember what these people were like? I mean because they carry this like historical aura, but for you I mean I imagine they were....

01-00:41:35
Vrana: Well the setting was very much, the setting was in my aunt and uncle's comfortable but modest home, but it was very much like I imagined the old *salon* where the European intelligentsia would sit around and drink tea or wine or something like that [*laughter*]. This is the Old Left, you know, some are drinking liquor, or martinis or something, but some are just drinking juice. But they would get into ideological arguments, and they loved it, they loved arguing with each other and yelling.

01-00:42:20
Moradi: Did you ever jump in?

01-00:42:23
Vrana: Not when the big shots were around, not when the celebrities were around, but within my family, yeah I participated.

01-00:42:35
Moradi: At that time, would you consciously identify as something like a New Left, like yourself being involved in a New Left movement?

01-00:42:44
Vrana: That's a good question. Uhm…

01-00:42:51
Moradi: — and I guess I ask because I'm curious if those outlines did become visible between this like Old Left, old vanguard…

01-00:43:01
Vrana: I found myself more comfortable...in terms of ideology, in terms of looking at the world and making sense of the present, I was more comfortable with the Old Left. In terms of tactical choices in the present, I was more aligned with the New Left — in terms of disruption, you know, in terms of shutting down whatever it was, the draft, the university, whatever it was. So it was that kind of a combination.

01-00:43:44
Moradi: And so, in 1968 or ‘9, your aunt helps you get onto the waterfront. What was the work you were doing? Were you a ship clerk or a longshoreman?

01-00:43:55
Vrana: Longshoreman. I had gotten through the warehouse workers local, Local 6, the ILWU. I had gotten a permit card and I worked occasionally in a couple of warehouses, like on an assembly line or throwing sacks of flour around, whatever. But then through that I got to know — also extra longshore work would go to the warehouse workers' hall on a daily basis, so I picked up a couple of those longshore jobs, and initially I found it pretty scary because the hazards, the mechanical hazards on the waterfront are enormous and constant. So I found a way to just hang back and watch the experienced guys do it and then do what they did, as opposed to just jumping in to show how gung ho I was or wasn't. I'm gonna survive. [*laughter*]

And then, let's see, what was the next part of that? Starting... Oh so then, there were a couple times of the year, like around the Christmas season, where the need for extra labor on the waterfront was so great with people taking vacations, shipping is up, and all that kind of stuff. So I was able to get directly on some jobs, especially at night when the union hall is closed and all that, the boss will tell one of the longshoremen, "You got a friend? Call him

up, tell him we need him," you know ‘cause they needed to fill out the shift, the number of men working. So I got a couple of those jobs, and I just started to feel that the way this worked, the intense physicality of it which then would be over — work really hard and then go home — I liked that. And I also liked [that] in loading and unloading ships, believe it or not, there were lots of problems to be solved, lot of challenges to figuring out spatial relationships and whatnot — I liked doing that. And then there's equipment to be operated which occasionally I liked but often I did not.

Technological change just destroyed the waterfront I loved working in. Anyway, so I knew after working maybe twenty times that that's the kind of work I wanted to be doing. And the last piece of that, to be perfectly honest, is that this is sort of... my drinking career is peaking, and if you want to drink and work, the waterfront is the place to be, [or at least] it used to be, it's changed a lot. But so it was gonna give me the freedom, I didn't have to deal with any of the issues created by my drinking. Anyway, it was a big fat package that sounded like a career to me. [*laughter*]

01-00:47:50
Moradi: And so at this point in the late sixties, most of the work was still done by the collective labor of gangs, right? Automation was picking up but...

01-00:48:01
Vrana: Yeah, automation was starting, mainly SeaLand — [cargo] that was going to Vietnam. Stuff that was not going to Vietnam was generally break-bulk, handled by hand or in smaller units, like a lift truck or something, but not the big metal container.

01-00:48:22
Moradi: Right, but the cargo to Vietnam was starting to be containerized?

01-00:48:27
Vrana: Yes.

01-00:48:28
Moradi: And so was this out of San Francisco or out of Oakland or both?

01-00:48:33
Vrana: Well the new container shipping was mainly in Oakland, because that was [where] the port land was available for the…the expansive land needed to accommodate these containers and all that.

01-00:48:51
Moradi: And so were you watching land be filled in and developed across the Bay?

01-00:48:55
Vrana: Yeah.

01-00:48:57

Moradi: And were you working in Oakland at all or were you mostly in…

01-00:49:00
Vrana: After I got my A-book — there are two levels, well there are three really, but at that time there were two levels of workers, registered longshore workers, "B" and "A."

01-00:49:20
Moradi: Can you describe what those are?

01-00:49:22
Vrana: Yeah, class-B gets the jobs left over by the class-A, and the class-A also have access to the so-called skill jobs — equipment operators, winches, forklifts, and in the modern era, cranes, straddle carriers, and all that. The class-B registrants are not full voting members of the union. They can attend meetings and they can speak at mic if given permission, but they cannot vote. Except they can vote — by federal law — they can vote on the contract, the longshore contract under which they work.

So, for the first four years I was a B-man, and during that time, ironically, they took on this big group, 725 in San Francisco, to meet the manpower needs of the explosion of shipping around Vietnam. And also jurisdiction, the language for the jurisdiction in place, for what were called the container freight stations which are the off-dock facilities where the big metal containers would be filled or emptied by longshore workers using forklift trucks primarily, we lost the jurisdiction over that case pretty quickly in the courts, the employers challenged it and won it. And then within two years the Vietnam War shipping tailed off. So our group, without political power in the union, is left scuffling. A lot of good guys — and they were all men at that time — a lot of good guys left, went back to their old jobs if they had one,. There were guys that went back to being butchers or UPS drivers or MUNI drivers, public transit drivers and all that.

But some of us that were either willing to endure poverty [*laughter*]… I don't want to exaggerate too much, I mean we worked enough like to get health and welfare benefits, which were absolutely extraordinary benefits. and by the end of the 1971 strike, there was a pay guarantee plan, provided it [the guarantee] was not awarded the way it was supposed to be, but it was enough to help fill in so that you could get by if you had a spouse or a partner that was working, you could get by. And I would say those of us who survived that time as B-men, that's what we did.

And then I got my A-book in '74 and immediately I signed up to work in a gang. That meant I worked in a group of men that was a fixed group. When necessary it would be supplemented by guys coming out of the hall, but we had our core of six and we worked break-bulk cargo. This is a long way of answering your question from twenty minutes ago [*laughter*]. But throwing

sacks of coffee, working in deep-freeze with sixty-pound cases of frozen meat — that was fun.

01-00:53:46
Moradi: Yeah?

01-00:53:46
Vrana: Yeah. The break-bulk that was not fun was long steel, and that was in the East Bay. Long steel was in the East Bay, it was hardly at all in San Francisco. And long steel was somewhere between forty and eighty feet, depending on what kind it was.

01-00:54:09
Moradi: And it sounds like some of the more dangerous cargo that was there.

01-00:54:12
Vrana: Yeah. And our group worked really well together. We all pretty much bought into the ethic that the best union man is the hardest worker. So we produced, we produced for the employers, and we enjoyed working hard, but we worked by the contract and we worked safely and we called work stoppages when things were not right, and it was great. It was absolutely great.

And then within four years, that work started to die out as they found new ways — there were cargoes that they had not been able to put into containers during the early years. For example, it was too hard to regulate the environment in containers holding coffee beans, but they figured it out. They figured it out. So it just became all… it's not automated but it's mechanized, and the machine is doing the lifting where you know you could have a couple hundred sacks of coffee bound together, whether it's inside a container or wrapped up in polyethylene on a [pallet] board or whatever, that moves what we could have done in four hours, that [machine] was doing in fifteen minutes.

01-00:55:52
Moradi: What was the culture of work before, when the gang was the fundamental unit of work? What were you all talking about? What was daily life like?

01-00:56:07
Vrana: Well in the gang, because we worked together regularly, there was a lot of family talk, "What's going on with your kid, what's going on with your wife?" And we would get into politics, we'd talk union stuff, we always paid attention to, you know, on any given ship there would be say at least five gangs working, we would pay attention to what was happening with the other gangs to make sure they were working in a safe manner, and if not if they needed help or support to get the right thing done. So it was a mix. And then there would be often discussions about how the work should proceed in the best way, ‘cause sometimes that was a bullshit debate to make the time go by [*laughter*]. You know, just arguing with each other, a lot of "motherfucker

this" and… but sometimes it was somebody who really knew a different way, and when someone really did, invariably they were allowed to lead the operation for that. So that's the kind of mix.

01-00:57:39
Moradi: It sounds democratic. Like fun and convivial and like you are amongst friends, but also really democratic how you operated, the work, yeah?

01-00:57:53
Vrana: Pretty much. I mean there were other times earlier when we were told how the old-timers dictated to the younger workers how it should be done, which was as much pigheadedness as it was real knowledge. And the thing was, like what I had said earlier about my own perspective, I would watch to see the safe way to do things, the right way to do things, how the old timers do things. I mean when a hotshot would show up on the job and try to control everything, you just shut him out, I mean it's kind of easy to do [*laughter*] but we didn't do anything nasty, there were other people who did nasty things to people they didn't like.

01-00:58:56
Moradi: Where would you... What would you do after work? Where would you spend time once you were done with your shift?

01-00:59:02
Vrana: It depends, I mean are we talking when I was drinking or not? [*laughter*] By the time I was sober on the waterfront, it was all family, and occasionally there were union meetings, but that's what it was.

01-00:59:21
Moradi: In the mid and late seventies, how did you start to see the work changing?

01-00:59:29
Vrana: Well, the general cargo was disappearing. It was inside the container and it was on the megaships. The cargo was inside the container that was handled by the giant crane or whatever vehicle was being used on the shore, like you know, straddle carriers or a tractor or whatever, but it was not being handled by human hands. And that's what happened, you didn't just stop handling the cargo, you'd stop seeing the cargo. You're just seeing metal box after metal box, same dimension, the only difference might be the logo on the side of the box because different boxes, containers, are owned by different companies and so they have their different logos, but otherwise you couldn't tell.

01-01:00:35
Moradi: What did this standardization mean for you?

01-01:00:40
Vrana: I couldn't stand it. I mean the work itself — you couldn't have conversations.

01-01:00:48

Moradi: Why not?

01-01:00:49
Vrana: You weren't side-by-side with anybody anymore, or the one or two places you were the machinery was so loud you couldn't talk. Onboard the ship where there had been say five gangs [with] six men each, usually increased to eight or ten so we've got fifty [to] sixty men, a container ship that is ten times as big as a freighter has eight [men], and they're lashers, they're dealing with this — again the system for doing this have changed — but at that time, there were heavy metal cables and heavy metal turnbuckles to tighten the cables. And that's what you did one after another, and generally you were working alone. In the very beginning of the introduction of some of the machinery, you worked in pairs but the employers found a way to reduce that so it was down to one for a lot of operations. So you were working alone, and it was very repetitive. The thought process that I mentioned that goes into interesting debate and discussion: not needed anymore.

01-01:02:15
Moradi: How do you communicate in that setting?

01-01:02:17
Vrana: Well it depends what level you are. If you're up at the top of the food chain, you have walkie talkies, but otherwise it's hand signals.

[...]

01-01:02:44
Moradi: I guess at this point I'm really curious about the Waterfront Writers. How did you come to learn about them?

01-01:02:55
Vrana: You know, I was trying to remember that, I couldn't remember who told me first.

01-01:02:59
Moradi: Was it Bob [Robert Carson]?

01-01:03:01
Vrana: It wasn't Bob, I didn't know Bob very well. There were a couple guys that I knew during the '71 strike, there were a couple of us that were around a rank-and-file newspaper called the *Longshore Victory.* I was the only B-man involved but there were A-men involved, and Bob was a ship clerk and he was around it. And we were all left-wingers of one stripe or another, and we really tried hard to keep the tone of the paper being constructive about the union. Some of these guys, a lot of left-wing politics is to take shots at the union one way or another, and for me personally that was not something I was going to abide. Be critical about a lot of things, about what's being considered, what the employers are offering, about the problems of unifying the union, and things like that, but... So it was always a possible deal breaker for me around

the *Longshore Victory* as to how long I would stay in there, but we pretty much stuck to that. You know if you can get a hold of it, Bob may even have it.

Anyways, there was Bob, there was — I'm trying to think about the carryovers that went from there to the Waterfront Writers.

01-01:04:47
Moradi: From [the] *Longshore Victory*?

01-01:04:49
Vrana: Yeah. it wasn't a direct one-to-one political move by any means but it was just like, there was some little clumps of lefties that operated in cultural and political settings together. Jeez I'll be damned if I can remember who... 'cause somebody told me there was going to be a meeting. Did you hear this?

01-01:05:19
Moradi: It sounds like in maybe early '77 Bob was chatting with folks and trying to get people together, but I don't really know the contours of what happened that year.

01-01:05:31
Vrana: 'Cause somebody asked me if I was doing any writing these days.

01-01:05:43
Moradi: Would it have been Frank [Silva]? Were you all close at that time?

01-01:05:46
Vrana: No I wasn't close to Frank at that time. It might have been George Benet.

01-01:05:50
Moradi: Yeah! Well were you doing writing, I mean outside of —

01-01:05:56
Vrana: Well, here's what I was doing: I had pretty much done most of my writing around journalistic type stuff and academic type stuff. But off and on through my life since I was a kid I was doing some kind of poetry. When I got on the waterfront, there were just certain moments of work, especially after I got sober, that were just emotionally really powerful, that the memory of them were like "Ugh, that was a close call. Ugh, that really pissed me off! Ugh!" [*laughter*] These were not the most uplifting moments. But anyway, they were powerful and so poetry…and some of the phrases that can come to mind when thinking about that stuff become kernels for something a little bigger, a poem, maybe some prose piece, or something. So I was starting to identify some of those pieces coming out of my work life, and so this intrigued me, the notion of some of the guys — I mean some of the names I knew, Herb Mills I knew, I didn't know him as a poet I knew him as a sociologist who wrote [*laughter*]…

01-01:07:44
Moradi: He wrote a lot!

01-01:07:46
Vrana: He wrote a lot, and I was just telling him, "Never stop writing like a sociologist."

01-01:07:53
Moradi: And he never did. [*laughter*]

01-01:07:57
Vrana: And anyway, so that's that. I actually had some bits and pieces. I liked the idea of pulling together a bunch of people. Bob's idea may have been from the get-go to get a book —

01-01:08:14
Moradi: Really?

01-01:08:15
Vrana: — to do an anthology, it may have been. Or at least do our own chapbook.

01-01:08:18
Moradi: And in '78, this chapbook came out, and that was really shortly after the group came together for the first time.

01-01:08:27
Vrana: Yeah, when we decided like we're not just going to go around begging, let's do it ourselves and let's do [this] kind of quality. The next one we did, the production quality was much better. You have that one, right?

01-01:08:44
Moradi: This is it if you want to look —

01-01:08:45
Vrana: No, not the book, it's a black-and-white, eight-and-a-half by eleven —

01-01:08:48
Moradi: Oh yeah, the 1980 — unfortunately that one I can't find circulating but I have read it.

01-01:08:55
Vrana: Actually I can get you that.

01-01:09:00
Moradi: I'd love that.

01-01:09:01
Vrana: Did Frank give you his book?

01-01:09:02
Moradi: Yeah, we have the very recent… we have a copy of that one.

01-01:09:09
Vrana: ‘cause as far as I know, there were just the two chapbooks*, that one, the black-and-white cover that I’m mentioning, and [the orange-cover, 1978 one].

[correction: there are three chapbooks in total: the two mentioned here plus a blue-cover, seven-page publication also published in 1978.]

01-01:09:20
Moradi: And so what did it mean for you all as workers to come together and represent yourselves?

01-01:09:27
Vrana: Well I think we had a ball. Here's what shocked the shit out of me: we could sit down, we could make plans, we had a few members of our group — I mean George Benet was an entrepreneur, especially on his own behalf [*laughter*], and Bob had the ego necessary to buy into that as well, and I mean this: [*The Waterfront Writers* book] is mainly through Bob's stick-to-it-iveness. Now we didn't always agree about what should go into these things, but we didn't shoot each other down. In fact, there was very little criticism, I mean there was no crosstalk really, other than "I really like that piece of yours" or something like that. We actually experimented sometimes, like Ken Fox and I, we agreed to each write a poem, I think the only thing we agreed upon is that the poem could be in stanzas and if it was in stanzas then no stanza could be more than eight lines, but nothing about meter, rhyme, anything. And then we would just shuffle the deck and put the two poems together and see what happens. It was great! I mean it was fun, let me put it that way, fun. We did it at one of our readings, cold, cold! We just each brought the thing we'd written. So things like that were happening, and that was great, and then the fact, you know, Brian's [Brian Nelson’s] line drawings, Mike [Vawter] and Frank's photography, I mean the fact that real quality stuff was coming out. I never felt that Herb really fit, but on the other hand, he was offering a context that was really helpful and his heart was so in it. We just had this assemblage that [was] great. And we started to believe our own press [*laughter*] like the talking monkeys. Well that's how the Today Show [happened] — have you seen the tapes?

01-01:11:55
Moradi: I'm hunting for one. I think Bob says he's got some.

01-01:11:58
Vrana: He might, I don't know. I mean, these days you should be able to dig it up from some digital archive, you know, it's like [*mock voice*] "Longshoremen writing.... are you a friend of Eric Hoffer’s?" [*laughter*]

01-01:12:19
Moradi: Well I mean, were you? Was he liked — I mean how did you feel about Eric Hoffer?

01-01:12:24
Vrana: Oh he was insufferable. I mean I only dealt with him once on the job, but he was around the union, he retired soon after and I suspected — I had read his stuff before I got on the waterfront — but I suspected that in his heart of hearts he was anti-union. It turned out there was secret proceedings — not secret — [but]the longshore caucus brought him up on charges of racism.

01-01:13:05
Moradi: Unsurprising.

01-01:13:06
Vrana: Did you know this?

01-01:13:07
Moradi: No I didn't but that doesn't shock me.

01-01:13:09
Vrana: And it was an executive session of the caucus, it was not in transcript, but the library, the archive…

01-01:13:18
Moradi: I would love to dig through that.

01-01:13:22
Vrana: Anyways, so he was not my favorite person to work with.

01-01:13:29
Moradi: But to step back for a second, in one of his pieces, Herb Mills describes his perspective, or the worker's perspective, as a Brechtian rat's-eye view of history. Is that how you felt? How did you feel writing about work as a worker?

01-01:13:52
Vrana: Well, I always tried to write about my view of what I was doing, and if what I was doing became history — there she is!

[At this point in the conversation, Robin Walker, the ILWU librarian introduces herself. We greet one another. This portion is excluded from the recording.]

So I mean to me, the Brechtian model is a little too third person, too distant, like a poster, too didactic! [...] I mean I had sort of an explosion of writing during the timeframe, I mean the energies were just being fed, but it was also most of the time, like I said, writing something that needed some kind of emotional expression that had to come out. So I wouldn't take it to that level, I mean I may be putting too much into the phrase about "Brechtian rat's-eye view" but I mean I think that it, in a sense that the rats are on the floor of the

ship, the deck of the ship, ok…[*laughter*]. But I do think Herb's work was Brechtian, no doubt about it.

01-01:15:26
Moradi: And so as you were writing, what were the kernels in the pieces that you [found] yourself drawn to? I mean you write as much about work as you do about love and being in —

01-01:15:42
Vrana: I mean that's always the counter-point, you know, like I said it was family for me at that point. I think that the possibility of getting killed or crushed at any time was part of the perspective and so there are moments like that that come up. Being connected to a historical past, that comes up, like I bring old timers into different poems, sometimes a composite but sometimes a couple of them were real actual guys, but that they meant something to me and I tried to always give some brush stroke as to what that emotional meaning of that person was. But then there's also the political economy, right, which you cannot escape. If you look at what's going where, and that was more difficult to try and express poetically —

01-01:17:08
Moradi: But you do.

01-01:17:08
Vrana: — I did a couple that I thought were ok. So that's…those are some of the topics into which a lot of what I wrote […] I stopped pretty much, I've kept notebooks over the years, but I haven't — two things have happened — I haven't written a finished poem in thirty years.

01-01:17:37
Moradi: What do you think it was about this setting that enabled you?

01-01:17:42
Vrana: Because there were these things that had to be said, they had an emotional power and needed to be said. And also, just before I got here and I was in graduate school, and then when I got here, all those energies were taken up doing this work, this intellectual work. You know, I just didn't have the patience to calm down and open up to get back to the space where I could be doing something which was emotionally-centered for me in my writing. But I've got these little notebooks, pieces of paper, whatever, and every few years…

You know, I'll show you, I had put together this volume, "red diaper papers," which was a combination, I mean, [almost] parallel with the waterfront poems I was doing were the poems from growing up in my family. And let me tell you from the point of view of poetry publishing or poetry reading: total disaster to put those two things together. Total disaster. Jesus. I did a reading up in Vancouver and this is the first time I was going to bust out my red

diaper poems, you know, so I did a few of the longshore poems, and then I did the red diaper poems and these people are going [*pauses, gawks, and laughs*]. But similarly, they were things that I needed to get out.

01-01:19:30
Moradi: Yeah.

01-01:19:31
Vrana: Anyways, so, then, I don't know, ten [or] fifteen years ago, as I was getting closer to retirement, I was thinking, well one of the things I'll do is I'm gonna pull them apart, I'm gonna pull the threads apart and have two separate bodies, chapbooks, whatever. So I'm close to doing that again.

01-01:19:52
Moradi: Great. And did you work with Frank at all with, I mean, how did you —

01-01:20:00
Vrana: He called me up.

01-01:20:01
Moradi: Yeah. How did that happen?

01-01:20:02
Vrana: I'm sorry. I'm assuming you're talking about his exhibition and the [recent] book.[1]

01-01:20:04
Moradi: Yeah, exactly.

01-01:20:06
Vrana: Well I was really touched that he wanted to use my poetry because I mean, Frank and I, it's one of those things, you know, we get along really well when we're together, but we won't see each other for ten years. But he got into a place where he was bringing out his photography and he had some exhibition possibilities, and when he said he wanted — he asked permission to use those poems and I was honored that he wanted to do it and I thought that he used them really well. […] It's funny to think that when I write a poem and I'm thinking about how it would be nice if it's felt and perceived the same way that I see and perceive it, it'd be nice — I don't really care, read the fucking thing [*laughter*] — that Frank did react the same as me, because he used them in similar places, the visuals that he wanted to expand through the addition of some text. And that's how it happened. So it was all him and it was after he had made up his mind about what he wanted to do.

01-01:21:30

[1] Silva, Frank and Gene Dennis. 2016. *Waterfront: Longshoremen in the Era of American Labor*. Bellingham, WA: True North Editions.

Moradi: To step back a little bit, do you remember your first reading with the Waterfront Writers?

01-01:21:40
Vrana: Um, I don't know if it was at that dance studio [Mandala] or I don't remember. Do you?

01-01:21:50
Moradi: Well I know in September of '77, the first to my understanding like quote-unquote official reading by the Waterfront Writers takes place at that Mandala folk dance studio, which I think is also either connected to or adjacent to a St Paul's Presbyterian* out in the Sunset.

[*correction: Mandala Folk Dance Center was then, at the time of the Waterfront Writers and Artists, located at 603 Taraval Street on the intersection of 16th Avenue and Taraval Street. Mandala now meets weekly at St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, located at 1399 43rd Avenue.]

01-01:22:14
Vrana: It's not adjacent to, it's in the area.

01-01:22:18
Moradi: Okay. Were you at that reading?

01-01:22:22
Vrana: Yeah.

01-01:22:23
Moradi: Do you remember what it was like?

01-01:22:26
Vrana: Yeah, I remember being really nervous. I hate getting up and speaking, I hate it. But my buddies were there, I mean some of them. Mike Vawter was a close friend of mine at that time, so he was there. This is who I'm looking at: George Benet was a character, we hang out together, we drank together in the past and Bob Carson — it turned out that Bob and I are related.

01-01:23:03
Moradi: No way.

01-01:23:04
Vrana: His wife is, was — she passed, I think, Jeanne* — she was the daughter of my father-in-law's cousin. Yeah. I mean that's a little too far removed to have a whole lot of meaning, but it was just weird, it was just weird to find that out. So, anyway, the setting was there and there were a lot of people there, I couldn't figure out what the hell. Every place we went as a group had that kind of feeling to it, that here we were doing what we want to do about the work that we love, or at least we love it like a family member [*laughter*] and it just made it comfortable and enjoyable. I mean, there were some where we took

shots at each other — jokes, you know, the bantering, kinda like what happens on the waterfront, you know, the masculine, macho put-down. I think the other thing was that I was surprised at how warmly the audience reacted to us.

[*correction: as of 2020, Jeanne is still alive.]

01-01:24:33
Moradi: Yeah. And who was in the audience?

01-01:24:36
Vrana: Well there were friends, but also Bob knew a lot of cultural types, you know, North Beach cultural types that were there.

01-01:24:54
Moradi: And then how did this, the first chapbook, come to be after the readings?

01-01:25:01
Vrana: Bob was talking about getting published and we were just too impatient to go through a whole process before we saw our stuff in print. We wanted to see it, we wanted to put ourselves out there. And we were finding out almost instantly about how many men and women were writing about their working life, up and down the coast and across the country and around the world and all that. So people were getting in touch with us, and Canada was the most consistent, Vancouver. Tom Wayman in Vancouver put together two or three anthologies that, you know, had some success up there.

01-01:25:58
Moradi: And were you all familiar with Tom Wayman or had connections to him?

01-01:26:03
Vrana: He made a connection with Bob and then he and I separately connected 'cause he invited me up to do a couple readings and wanted to use some of my poems in his anthology, stuff like that. We had a principle of supporting each other's work, being included in whatever we did. I think there was a point where we were attracting people that we didn't really know and we didn't want them to be included [*laughter*]. We did include — the black-and-white chapbook had some of the Canadian stuff in there.

01-01:26:59
Moradi: Yeah, there's a few names that I wasn't familiar [with] like Zoë Landale and there's even someone in the Bay [Area] whose name I don't recognize. I wish I could [remember], maybe we can come back to that. How did those connections to the folks in Vancouver develop?

01-01:27:23
Vrana: They got in touch with us. They saw something [in us].

01-01:27:30
Moradi: Do you know how they found out about you?

01-01:27:33
Vrana: I don't, I did, I don't. I don't know whether they saw a chapbook, or they saw the TV show or one of the press write-ups. Have you any of those? I've got a file at home [with] press clippings.

01-01:27:49
Moradi: There's a few that I've been able to find on the internet, but really only a handful, like some stuff in the [*San Francisco*] *Examiner*, and one thing in the *Berkeley Barb*. But I mean, this book was a *cause célèbre*, like people were excited about it. What was the press like? What was getting all of that attention like, for you?

01-01:28:13
Vrana: Well, that's where we start believing our own press clipping. And also that's when we started to have divisions in the group.

01-01:28:25
Moradi: Over what?

01-01:28:27
Vrana: Over how much of whose work is going to be in the book, and then handling the press requests, let's just say Bob did a lot and that caused some friction. And I think, also, that the more known we became and the more interest there was in our work, the more attention we had to pay to the organization. I mean, it was like getting in the way of, you know, doing the writing, doing the photography or whatever.

01-01:29:26
Moradi: And then how [did] the group's development continue into the early eighties?

01-01:29:36
Vrana: Well see, I mentioned about being injured and I was kind of out of circulation and, let's see, our daughter was born in '79.

01-01:29:51
Moradi: So in the midst of [it all].

01-01:29:53
Vrana: Yeah. And that really took the wind out of my sails both in terms of writing and in terms of participating. And…oh here's something though. The second reading I think we did at the dance studio, George Benet showed up with this young woman and he introduced us and she became my wife.

01-01:30:36
Moradi: [*laughter*] You're kidding.

01-01:30:38
Vrana: She and George lived in a rooming house over by Pacific Heights. And she would — there were a lot of people in that room, you know — but

occasionally she would bake cookies to try and get everybody to come down and have coffee and cookies and get to know each other, right? So George was coming to our reading to read himself and he asked Sally to come along. He told her, he said, "I'm not hitting on you." [*laughter*] Anyways, so she came and we met and then we did another reading, didn't see her for months. Then we did another reading that she came to, and that was the beginning. So anyway, I owe that to the Waterfront Writers.

But anyway, so she came and she brought our daughter to one or two readings, but I was aware that there was a change in me, I mean, the person that wrote the poems I was reading was not the same person with a wife and daughter right there. Anyway, so I was also changing a little bit, and when I could write it was different and I felt I had to let it be. And then rapidly with the more serious injury, moving to Wisconsin for four years, and it was during that time that the Waterfront Writers went...

I can't remember who I was in contact with, it might've been Mike Vawter, I don't think it was Bob, but somebody else talking about the decline of the Waterfront Writers, you know, and I think part of it was that some of the energy that was driving the group was that after this, the new level of attention was a different kind of attention. You know, like when you're going to City Lights Bookstore or are you going to that studio [Mandala] or Portrero Neighborhood Center, you know, it's different than being in the green room. And also that it was just like one or two people in the green room.

01-01:33:30

Moradi: It sounds like there is a community that came — at least a loose community — that came together around this sort of worker and literary scene. Did it feel like you were giving some of that up as you gained press and it [the group] became really seriously public?

01-01:34:08

Vrana: Yeah, I think…it became more uncomfortable. It became uncomfortable in that there was attention — people were giving us attention because other people were giving us attention, not because of what we were producing, not because of what we were creating. That was a hard one. I mean, other people, like I said, my family's situation changed, other people had other changes that they were going through. It was hard to sustain it. I know Bob devoted himself — this might be unfair — but to this novel, this epic novel that he had been working on. I mean it changed what he was doing, and I mean he had almost like an agent's role for the group in terms of trying to ferret out places and respond to opportunities and get his stuff done along with the group's, trying to find that balance.

01-01:35:37

Moradi: Yeah. As Bob stepped away — or did he step away to do his own work or was he holding all of it together, like including the Waterfront Writers?

01-01:35:50
Vrana: Well, I think he was trying to hold it together, and then it was, it was too hard. And then he felt — I'm not absolutely positive about this sequence — he had been working on his own stuff and then when it became more difficult to just be doing it and the group was not as cohesive around him, that he didn't hold up and did more of his own, he was very disciplined, writing many hours a day.

01-01:36:28
Moradi: And then is that kind of how the Waterfront Writers slowly dissolved as a group that held together?

01-01:36:41
Vrana: Yeah.

01-01:36:42
Moradi: Do you know if factions or — I mean that's kind of a loaded word — but did like groups or did like a few of the contributors still hold together as a collective? Did people go on to do their own work? Do you know what afterlives the group lived?

01-01:37:03
Vrana: Mike has always been a photographer. Frank has always been a photographer. Brian I don't know. I saw [in] some place some of his work, some of his line paintings, but I can't swear about that. Herb devoted himself to his own novel and his sociological writing about the waterfront. Let's see. Ken Fox got quite ill and passed, but I think he got back more into his music, he was a musician, [a] jazz musician. And let's see. Norm, I don't know, I have no idea.

01-01:38:05
Moradi: Who is Norm? [*pause as we look through the book*] Bob told us of a name Norm Young, does that sound — I don't know anything about a Norm Young.

01-01:38:24
Vrana: He was a ship clerk.

01-01:38:29
Moradi: Do you know if he appeared in the black-and-white cover chapbook?

01-01:38:33
Vrana: Might be. Jim Hamilton did not really participate in the group.

01-01:38:44
Moradi: Was he a longshoreman or a dockworker?

01-01:38:47
Vrana: Yeah.

01-01:38:47

Moradi: Okay.

01-01:38:48
Vrana: Asher Harrer did not participate really. So some of these guys, I mean they had some pieces that got in the book, right, but in terms of the life of the group. George, Bob, me, Ken, Herb, Brian, Frank, Mike.

01-01:39:17
Moradi: Do you know where Leonard Malliet ended up? Do you remember him?

01-01:39:25
Vrana: Leonard Max Malliet, "Crazy Max." [*laughter*] Yeah, I love Max. Max died. He became a full-time bicyclist —

01-01:39:39
Moradi: Whoa, good for him.

01-01:39:42
Vrana: — in response to heart problems, which is what finally killed him.

01-01:39:55
Moradi: When did he pass?

01-01:39:56
Vrana: I don't know exactly, [but] it's not too long ago.

01-01:40:05
Moradi: Do you remember anything about — in this book he goes by J. Price — but Lee Olds, did you know him at all?

01-01:40:15
Vrana: I probably did, but I can't remember or place anything about him right now. I mean if he was involved in the group [...] there was some things that happened where the people that were doing the life of the group were not the same people as... But sometimes I remember Bob saying, you know, "So-and-so is a clerk and he would like to read something," "Sure, sure," but they didn't have to do anything.

01-01:40:52
Moradi: So there were people outside of the group that were still presenting at the readings, right?

01-01:40:56
Vrana: Yeah.

01-01:41:00
Moradi: And when we chatted with Bob, he had mentioned that there were some tensions between ship clerks and longshoremen, both, I mean, on the waterfront in general but that kind of transpired within the group as well.

01-01:41:15

Vrana: Yeah, it was mainly Herb, Herb and Bob. I mean, clerks historically have been white and better paid. And there are all kinds [of tensions] that came up within the group, and Herb triggered it as much as anybody. I mean it was unfortunate… if I agreed with the historical analysis, that's not the same thing as talking to the guys at the table, trying to help each other be better.

01-01:42:11
Moradi: And what was the tension that took place on the waterfront outside of the group between ship clerks and longshoremen? Did it transpire into actual conflicts?

01-01:42:24
Vrana: Not for a long time. I mean in the very early [*inaudible*]. The clerks were controlled by old white guys and but then over the years longshoremen petitioned and grieved and negotiated to have [...] at least half of the new [clerk] hires come from the longshoremen. Previously there had been sort of [an] informal arrangement that injured longshore workers, disabled, would be accepted into the clerks.

But this was different, and the guys that were by seniority eligible to transfer into the clerks were of color and it created tension and brought up, for the older black guys, brought up some old memories of being excluded. Then there's some other stuff about like the pay structure for the clerks until, maybe 10 years ago I think, it worked out that on an eight-hour shift they made more money. So it's like they do easier work, they're white-collar workers, and they make more money.

01-01:44:07
Moradi: It sounds like with increasing mechanization, some of the work converged and that it is operated by computer or by machine rather than [manually]. Did the distinctions between ship clerks and longshoremen slowly erode?

01-01:44:25
Vrana: No, because the computer-based work is under the clerks.

01-01:44:30
Moradi: I see. Okay.

01-01:44:33
Vrana: The computers have made possible the planning of the loading of a ship, it's all on models. They figure out what goes where in order to maintain the weight distribution and the port of discharge and all that stuff. So that's all done that way. The monitoring of the flow of cargo is also [done] by software through the just-in-time delivery system. You know, Amazon, or whatever, is [in control of] the information and documentation of the cargo. And now that that is in the computer, that too is under the clerks. [...]

There's one master [ILWU] contract that the clerks are under, but under that they have their own agreement. They're taking the computer and what it takes to program it, maintain it, repair it, and saying that's hard work, because the computer is doing what our members used to do, with pencil and paper, or just figuring things out. So, the employers have been refusing to train our people to do it and then insisting on their right to hire people off the street to come in and do it. So we have the language in the contract, but not the reality, not the implementation of it, which is what's going on [in] the big confrontation between the union and the employers right now, because right now we're teetering on the brink of automation of major ports. And which is connected to this — [...] I mean, robotics is its own huge technology — but the software, everything that's in the computer that operates the roboticized system is the same one that we've been working with. So technically we have jurisdiction over maintaining and repairing the robots. [But] so if we don't have the people capable of doing it, it's not gonna happen.

01-01:47:40
Moradi: I actually do want to return to a point that you were making earlier about some of the connections that you all were developing to other groups. Did you know other folks on the waterfront in Oakland or San Francisco who were making art about their work but weren't in the Waterfront Writers?

01-01:48:06
Vrana: Not writers.

01-01:48:07
Moradi: Yeah. What kind of other —

01-01:48:10
Vrana: — artists, painters. [...] At different times there have been exhibits by ILWU members who were artists done by the local.

01-01:48:34
Moradi: And then had you heard about other groups doing similar work along the coast or across the U.S. or outside?

01-01:48:46
Vrana: There was some stuff from the auto workers, bunch of autoworkers.

01-01:48:52
Moradi: Like out in the Midwest?

01-01:48:52
Vrana: Mhm, in Detroit. Cab drivers, and that was San Francisco. Vancouver B.C.

01-01:49:14
Moradi: And how did you find their perspectives connect to, resonate [with], or differ from [the] perspectives that you and the Waterfront Writers held?

01-01:49:25

Vrana: They're [the Vancouver writers] very similar, the only thing is that they had more diversity of occupation and industry: fishermen, miner, doctor…there was a welder, I think a ship scaler. I don't remember there actually being a longshoreman from Vancouver. But anyway, they were the Vancouver Industrial Writers' Union. And Zoë Landale, she was a part of that, Kirsten Emmott, phenomenal writer, and Mark Warrior. So anyway, those are the folks out there. So that was a little different, right? I mean they're not anchored amongst — I mean, here our anchor was the ILWU, and within that, the longshore division which included the clerks.

01-01:50:44
Moradi: Did you, being affiliated with the union, and…them not being affiliated [with] like a central worker union change your [or] make your perspectives a little different?

01-01:50:59
Vrana: No. I mean, they didn't harken to a legacy [like] we did, but otherwise, no.

01-01:51:10
Moradi: But the legacy was important for you guys.

01-01:51:15
Vrana: Yeah, to each of us, more or less, not always the same. I mean, like the photographers were not really pedagogical in what they did, not in that kind of way. I mean, yes, in terms of the setting and seeing the work and the workers in place, but it was not tied to union politics or the class struggle is — I mean it *was* ultimately! [*laughter*]

01-01:51:52
Moradi: How did 1934, for example, weigh on you all? Or 1971…

01-01:52:02
Vrana: Well, '71 we were all in the middle of it. There was a lot of…disappointment in the aftermath of the strikes. It varied amongst us, we were not at all unified in our point of view, but [we knew] that we had not won the war against automation, against mechanization. And going back to '34, we had all started, as I remember, we had all started no later than '69 on the waterfront, which meant that there were veterans of 1934 working alongside us. That made the difference. I mean it's one thing to be working against old timers who refer back to it or just, you know, carry the aura of having been through it. So I mean there were some guys that would tell stories.

01-01:53:40
Moradi: You mentioned pedagogy. Is there a pedagogical quality in [affirming] the memories of '34 for a newer generation through this work, through this literary and artistic work?

01-01:54:00
Vrana: I think so.

01-01:54:02
Moradi: What was there to teach? What did you want to teach?

01-01:54:13
Vrana: A combination of an appreciation — I mean I only did it in one poem, really heavy-handed, "Frisco Blackie," — but yet that was a real conversation. I mean, maybe I pieced together a couple…but in a case in which poetic license was not taken really [*laughter*] — that to understand what it took to have not just survived 1934, given the forces arrayed against the union, against the workers, but to have *won* and [to explain] what was that victory. After working up here in the education program, making very clear — learning to make very clear — that we won the strike because we were willing to die. And what does winning the strike mean? It means that we got an arbitration award. We didn't force the employer to sit down and sign off on a contract with us. We agreed to do what they had wanted us to do for months during the strike, which was to agree to arbitration. It so happened that the power of what we had prepared, plus the coalition that existed in the Roosevelt administration, gave us an arbitration panel that was willing to respond to the facts. What are the odds of that? [...]

So having an appreciation for how close we came to not having any of this, but yet we got to the point of enabling that decision to be made, [that decision] that gave us that huge victory, because of the willingness of people to die for the cause. That's enormous. [...] And to me that is an emotional chord you try and strike with people, not an intellectual understanding.... And then you get into things about understanding who were those people, who did it, why did they, why were they willing to die in '34? Because they're as likely to die if they didn't. So, in our trainings we've often tried to replicate the enormity of the decisions made. There have been some other seminal moments in our history —

01-01:57:23
Moradi: Such as?

01-01:57:24
Vrana: Well, in Hawaii, in organizing in Hawaii and finally achieving success on the [sugar] plantations after 1945. The length to which people would go, forced out of desperation — I mean that's the thing, being reduced, the alternative being so awful, they would be willing to take that step, whatever it was at whatever time — that's part of the picture that we can paint. But I think that the connection is made if you paint it based on your experience. I mean I can't tell you how many times I read somebody's fiction or poetry or whatever, you know, that the politics are just heroic, but like, “Oh give me a fucking break.” That's kind of my reaction because [it's] not real, it's not real. I guess that's part of what I mean, not everybody agrees about that, that's the difference between the Brechtian model and [*laughter*] you know, why I don't [agree with it]. I remember being so disappointed after I went through a period in

college of just seeing a whole bunch of Brecht productions and just being so disappointed at not being moved, you know, I'm saying "right on," but just not being moved. Anyway, so finding the way to move.

01-01:59:20
Moradi: And I guess looking to the horizon ahead of us, ahead of, you know, workers in shipping and logistics, what lessons would you offer? How do you think they might or should move?

01-01:59:49
Vrana: Well, I think more people need to be encouraged to do this.

01-01:59:53
Moradi: Yeah. And what is “this”?

01-01:59:54
Vrana: *This* is speaking from one person to another. When you're writing — let's just say poetry right now — I mean it's me and you, me for writing it, you for reading it, right? You know, that's where I think it starts from. [...] The ILWU has this mythology behind it of what it has done and what it stands for. And the reality is very precarious, very precarious. [...] The longshoremen are the elite, either because of that mythology that they got on their backs or the amount of money in their pocket, they’re the elite in the ILWU. You got people in the ILWU who make $15 an hour, you know, they're not living in the same world. Some of the longshore people came from that and they appreciate what has happened in their lives, but a lot of them have just been handed [it]. So to get *this* group to tell *this* group what life is like and what they want, who they are, and what they want from this group, that's what we work on in our trainings. We get people to name three things that you want the longshoreman to help you with. Ask the longshoremen what is it that you want the hotel workers from Hawaii to help you with...

01-02:01:56
Moradi: And what are some of the things that they may [want]?

01-02:01:59
Vrana: Solidarity, respond to us when we're having a contract struggle or organizing campaign, you know, nothing lifts our spirits like seeing the longshore banner come to the picket line.

01-02:02:11
Moradi: Yeah, I know that's certainly true when those Proud Boys and fascists threatened to show up in San Francisco [in August 2017], the union showed up and that was so moving.

01-02:02:22
Vrana: Yeah, exactly. So that's the kind of stuff, I mean it keeps getting reduced — whether it's art or politics or [*inaudible*] — to me it keeps getting reduced to finding ways to get it down to where one person is talking to another and then

you build up from there and the groups get larger and then you can stand together.

01-02:02:50
Moradi: Dialogue is a way of building solidarity and affinity, yeah?

01-02:02:53
Vrana: Yeah.

01-02:02:57
Moradi: I think that's a really great note to end on.[*laughter*]

01-02:03:00
Vrana: [*laughter*] Good, I'm for that.

[*a portion of the recording is excluded here as we wrapped up the conversation; we then discussed concluding thoughts*]

01-02:03:05
Moradi: I guess something that's been lingering on my mind is [...] as this is being archived and this project is developing [...] what would you like to see come out of this in terms of an archive coming together or a collection?

01-02:03:28
Vrana: Well, just the fact of what we do and what we tried to do and what we did produce collectively and individually. I think that there are lessons, at the time I didn't really think about it this way, but I think that what happened with the dissolution of the group was that we were so reliant on consensus as a way to proceed, you know, the conversation producing sufficient agreement to move forward on something. But we were not either aware or really willing to do the work to maintain the group. [I'm] not even talking about growing the group. I mean that would be another thing [inaudible], become an organization like the Vancouver Industrial Writers' Union, expand beyond the scope of the ILWU. But that's what made us, that's what our bond between us was and what attracted attention. So I don't want to say that was necessarily a mistake, but there is something that we missed in terms of making it a priority.

And sometimes it's just serendipity. I mean, that was like what happened with my having a family and getting injured and stuff like that, and moving out of town and all, it's just like boom! There I went. Not that I was pivotal in terms of the organization, but it meant something to me. And then it wasn't there.

Interview 2: September 11, 2019
[Audio file: Eugene_Dennis_Vrana_interview_2_September_11_2019_audio.mp3]

02-00:00:00
Moradi: I want to trace back to two, three months ago when we first sat down and talked about how you ended up in the Bay Area and ended up on the waterfront. You said you moved to San Francisco in 1967, right?

02-00:00:18
Vrana: No, I left Madison, Wisconsin [for Berkeley] in the fall of '65.

02-00:00:29
Moradi: Okay. And then what was the road to the Bay Area?

02-00:00:34
Vrana: Direct. [*laughter*] That was my intention, was to come to the Bay Area.

02-00:00:44
Moradi: Yeah. And you've lived in the Bay since, since you moved here or did you —

02-00:00:48
Moradi: Not continuously, been both East Bay and San Francisco and then went back to Wisconsin from '82 to '86 when my wife was in medical school.

02-00:01:08
Moradi: And then you came back here.

02-00:01:10
Vrana: And then we came back.

02-00:01:11
Moradi: So you've been here for quite a long time. And I remember you told me you took a lot of interest in the shoreline and you know, the kind of meeting of city and sea, [so] how have you seen this city and the shoreline change in all of the time that you've been here?

02-00:01:30
Vrana: Well, looking at it mainly from San Francisco — well, there are two, there are two parts — for San Francisco, when I started down here, the break-bulk cargo was still being worked along the Embarcadero at the piers north and south of the Ferry Building. And nearby were a lot of the bars and restaurants that catered to the workers that worked there. And that was transformed with the decline, the deterioration of the piers and the inability of public entities to finance the maintenance and repair and expansion of those facilities. And the Embarcadero being fed by rail lines that, as the cargo started to come in containers, those containers couldn't fit through the facilities, the tunnels, or whatever, that brought the trains into the Embarcadero.

So we have a decline of the infrastructure and an inability to handle the transformation, the containerization of cargo. To those of us who are skeptical

if not paranoid about all this, this was all engineered by real estate interests in order to open up the waterfront for commercial development, hotels and so forth. And the current state of the waterfront on the one hand bears that out in terms of, [if] we look at the nature of commerce along the waterfront, and then there was also [the] opening of access, public access literally to the shoreline to go out on the pier, for people to go out on the piers, parks, recreation. That's a good thing, that's a good thing, but that could have been alongside industrial waterfront work.

Anyway, so that was huge. At the same time that was happening in San Francisco, the Port of Oakland went through its transformation making use of land availability to set up the big new container yards and facilities for the cranes to load and unload the new container ships that became prominent in the sixties and seventies. That too changed because what had been work in certain parts of Oakland and Alameda — that was break-bulk cargo — the containers [and] the container trucks and all that became the kind of work that was there, so that if you didn't want to do that kind of work, you're in trouble.

02-00:04:57

Moradi: And who were the folks that were getting that new kind of work and who was being put out of work?

02-00:05:05

Vrana: Well, initially, what had been negotiated by the union was to have any people displaced by the new technology to get early retirement. And we also had a pay guarantee for reduced work opportunity and to cover the effects of reduced work opportunity. And that seemed to kind of hold the line. [...] The group that I came in with in 1969, there were over 700 of us and we went through a period of not working very much, but we came out of it in about five, six years. We came out of it and work started to increase, our union seniority had grown to the point of being able to access certain kinds of jobs that had not been available before, especially equipment operation. So since that time the productivity continues to increase exponentially in terms of how many tons of cargo are being moved per worker [or] by hours worked by worker. But actually the numbers of longshore workers has gone up even though not proportionate to the increase in cargo.

02-00:06:59

Moradi: And where were these new employees coming from? Was it as an accessible of a job as it had been when you had started?

02-00:07:12

Vrana: Well, it's not very accessible when I started.

02-00:007:15

Moradi: Oh really?

02-00:07:17

Vrana: The hiring system that was in effect in 1969 had been put in place in 1959, and there were groups hired in '59, '63 '65, '67, '69. We were the last big group. And then after that, there was a long period where only very small group were brought in, and by "brought in" [it] means that the union and the employer had to agree on new hires into the industry, into what was called the registered workforce. And the union was always pressing for more registration. The employers wanted to keep the numbers down, they wanted to be able to get casual workers off the street to fill in when needed, when there were peaks of need for workers, and the union wanted them in the union and protected by the union contract.

At the same time, there were pressures coming from the community to open access to the general public [and particularly women and people of color*] to break through what was often a [direct] connection between the existing workforce and the new workers, in other words, family connections, friendship connections, kinship connections of different kinds [— in other words, to break through historical patterns in certain parts of the union that may have maintained *de facto* discrimination*]. And the employers often had that same [self-]interest, there were people that they wanted to see working on the waterfront. But that system was changed under litigation to have what's been called the "random draw," that anybody who's interested essentially throws their name into the computer with everybody else and it's randomly selected. That has broken down that connection of generations of longshore workers in the industry and in the union, and that has had a tremendous effect on the composition of the workforce and the union.

[**the bracketed sections in this paragraph were added by Gene Vrana for clarity*]

02-00:09:54

Moradi: And what is that effect?

02-00:09:57

Vrana: Well, there's a question of political and historical consciousness, that in some places — and I'm not just talking about San Francisco now — in some places there were forms of discrimination that were maintained unofficially and under the table, both by race and by gender. And in places where the union did not take [on] the leadership in opposing that kind of discrimination, the union was compelled to accept, for legal reasons, the random draw which then came back to affect the union by, like I said, not having generations from the same family working on the waterfront. [...]

When I started in '69, there were still veterans of the 1934 strike working on the waterfront and their brothers and their sons, because there are no women at the time who were working there. So there became families that were known, especially in union politics, who were involved or committed and were worthy of respect and support. And it's been a challenge ever since

because we went through another…from 1969 for the next 20 years, there was a period of, I would say labor — not necessarily peace — but there was sorting out all the implications of dealing with the new technology, dealing with these new ways of hiring, and so forth. And a lot of people in the union, a lot of members of the union did not want it to face not being able to rely on the old traditions, like the oral traditions on the waterfront of passing along political and labor relations, traditions, legacies of the union. That if you didn't do it, you're going to have to find another, more formal way of doing it, say, classroom-based education for new hires as an example. And that is something that…the union, since 1994, has tried to develop education programs to address those problems, but it's a whole slew of problems. It's more like what the rest of the labor movement has had to deal with where they don't have a tight-knit, committed core of people that went through the formative [period] of the struggles of the thirties anymore.

02-00:13:16

Moradi: How was the disappearance of these oral traditions related to, for instance, computerization, containerization, [and the] automation of work?

02-00:13:27

Vrana: Well, the opportunity for passing along information through the oral tradition came through the workplace where you were working all day long with anywhere from six to a dozen people down in the hold of the ship or on the dock. And instead being isolated from each other, often just working alone on a piece of equipment or maybe two people surrounded by noise that made conversation impossible, so that there was a real breakdown of just the opportunity, the workplace context that made conversation possible and necessary.

02-00:14:17

Moradi: And were the formal channels that substituted these informal traditions, were they as effective in sustaining [these traditions]?

02-00:14:27

Vrana: Well, I don't think they were as effective because they didn't reach as many people. But we, the union, applied for and received an endowment — not an endowment, a grant — from NEH, the National Endowment for the Humanities, for a massive oral history project that went on for several years. It was jointly administered and carried out by UC Berkeley, the Institute for the Study of Social Change*, and the ILWU Communications Department and some other people. Harvey Schwartz, historian and oral historian and the union's oral historian, has been working for twenty years to render those oral historical life interviews into formats that can be used for education. Both in terms of putting them in peoples' hands, I mean we have one book, *Solidarity Stories* that Harvey edited and put together, and then there are the tapes themselves and transcripts that are available for research both at the ILWU and at the Bancroft, at the Oral History [Center]. [...] But so we've been using those but it's not as widespread, it's not the same thing as talking on the job,

bantering back and forth, being anecdotal and recounting the history and historical event.

[**note: the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California, Berkeley became the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues following a merger with the Survey Research Center in 2009.]*

02-00:16:41
Moradi: Or I imagine talking off the job, in the bars and cafes and restaurants [on the waterfront].

02-00:16:45
Vrana: Yeah, well they don't exist, that doesn't happen. People don't hang out at the [union] hall the way they used to. And the restaurants are gone. More people live further away from the waterfront so the daily experience is to fight traffic coming in and get a jump on traffic leaving, and not hanging out, having some drinks or whatever.

02-00:17:30
Moradi: Where are these workers dispersed to now?

02-00:17:34
Vrana: Any place within a hundred miles of the waterfront.

02-00:17:37
Moradi: Wow.

02-00:17:39
Vrana: I mean there are people that do commute in, like into San Francisco, from Sacramento, from the mountains, and Central Valley.

02-00:17:56
Moradi: Was the hall a social space?

02-00:18:00
Vrana: It was.

02-00:18:02
Moradi: And what changed about it?

02-00:18:10
Vrana: People began by the early seventies, mid-seventies, to begin to find ways to circumvent the hiring hall to get their jobs, getting friends, authorizing friends to pick up the job. Again, it was tied to how inconvenient was to drive from down the Peninsula or in the East Bay to drive into San Francisco to the hall to get a job. And then there were pressures, both from the employer and some members — not the majority — to computerize the dispatch so that the union-elected dispatcher was not in charge of dispatching jobs on a regular basis. In ways or places that that kind of dispatch has been implemented, that has further broken down the connection between workers standing together, you

know, like 600 in the hiring hall in the morning to get the job. And then the growth of steady men, which was a huge thing, [...] often — often, not always — but often tied to skilled jobs, mechanics that the employer has the right to keep on the job permanently and that they don't come back to the hiring hall, certainly not on a daily basis. So there are all these changes, pressures that have broken down the hall as a core of the community. It exists in the minds of many in that way, but the reality is not in my opinion the same.

02-00:20:08
Moradi: It sounds like there's some historical distance or distance in one's memory to the hiring hall, like it's a detached sort of connection to it.

02-00:20:17
Vrana: Yeah.

02-00:20:19
Moradi: What does a computerized hiring hall look like? Or what does computerized dispatch mean?

02-00:20:26
Vrana: [It means] that the employer puts in the categories of jobs that they need, and how many jobs in each category, and what pier or shift their people are needed at what time.

02-00:20:36
Moradi: And how do you get called for [work]?

02-00:20:38
Vrana: And so you have a number. The number you have is based on your seniority and it's [tied] to when you came into the industry. The jobs are dispatched according to what's called the category, the occupational category, like crane driver or lift driver or winch driver or lasher, tractor driver — meaning the people that drive the containers around the yard. So in your category, if you just go up and you punch in your number, in some cases you can make a preference for location or the computer spits out the job or where you go. This is as opposed to going up to what is a window — like a teller's window at a bank — going up to the window and looking to see the array of jobs that the dispatcher has in front of them to see where you want to go to work, and you ask, and if you're on decent terms, then you get your partner and the two of you get to go where you want to go. But the computer is removing the element of choice, of selection, and dealing with the dispatcher.

02-00:22:27
Moradi: To step back a little bit, you spoke of the changing development on the waterfront and almost like a conspiratorial real estate interest. What were those real estate interests on the waterfront?

02-00:22:42
Vrana: Joseph Alioto.

02-00:22:44
Moradi: Who is that?

02-00:22:45
Vrana: He was the mayor [and tied to] one of the big law firms in San Francisco. They were a family. Restaurants and hotels and all of that.

02-00:22:58
Moradi: And what were they seeking? What did they seek to benefit from —

02-00:23:03
Vrana: Owning all of the property.

02-00:23:06
Moradi: Yeah. And did they snatch it up?

02-00:23:09
Vrana: Well, they got a lot of it. There are a lot of other people that did the same thing, I mean just who owns the Salesforce high-rise?

02-00:23:19
Moradi: You tell me.

02-00:23:20
Vrana: I thought Salesforce, for one, you know. To have hotels on the waterfront is making a lot more money for real estate interests than is cargo moving across the dock that they don't own or control or receive any revenue from.

02-00:23:47
Moradi: What sort of developments do you start to see on the waterfront besides hotels?

02-00:23:59
Vrana: Hotels, restaurants, office buildings, fitness clubs.

02-00:24:07
Moradi: Wild. I mean, the class content of the waterfront sounds like it's changing, it sounds like it's catering to a whole different population.

02-00:24:17
Vrana: Yeah. Now it is possible for ordinary people to come down to the Embarcadero and spend a day, right? But if they're going to do things that cost money, that's a different kettle of fish. So yes, there's public access and it's neat, I don't deny that, that's a good thing. Everything from the ballpark north has been transformed. The Ferry Building is a boutique farmer's market. So, I mean, it's fun if you're a tourist [or] if you're in the tourist trade, that's all fun but it's just different. It's just people not interested in or catering to maritime use, industrial maritime use of the waterfront.

02-00:25:23

Moradi: And what sort of ramifications did it have further inland into neighborhoods like the Sunset or the Richmond or Mission?

02-00:25:34
Vrana: I don't know.

02-00:25:35
Moradi: Did you see any sort of reverberations and waves inland?

02-00:25:39
Vrana: Well, just in terms — I mean this is getting pretty far removed — as the kind of work that was being done in the city became more and more white-collar, professional, and all that, that the pressure on real estate values was going up. And that's part of why working people commute a hundred miles to a job in San Francisco, it's that they can't afford to live in San Francisco. So that's it. I mean that's the example of what's happened. It's been driving out ordinary working people with working-class incomes, and then the African-American population likewise being driven out of the center of the city further and further away.

02-00:26:44
Moradi: Can you tell me a little bit about what happened on the Oakland waterfront with containers [and] containerization taking place?

02-00:26:55
Vrana: Well, [in Oakland it] was a bit different because it was not so much displacing breakbulk cargo and older forms of cargo handling. It was taking advantage of the entrepreneurial efforts by the Port of Oakland to sell off or lease a lot of the available waterfront land for [the] kinds of piers and shoreside facilities that the container ships and related terminals needed. So there were certain parts of West Oakland that were impacted, but mainly in terms of traffic and the industrial pollution from ships and trucks.

02-00:27:52
Moradi: The industrial pollution in West Oakland is really, really awful.

02-00:27:56
Vrana: Yeah.

02-00:27:59
Moradi: Had you heard of the community efforts organizing to stop pollution or truck idling in West Oakland? Had you heard about that when you were working?

02-00:28:10
Vrana: Not when I was working. I was up at the library, at the International [union headquarters], when this became more of an issue. It was taken on in different ports. The ILWU locals, like in southern California [and] San Francisco, got very involved with community organizations to fight that kind of environmental pollution hazard.

02-00:28:46
Moradi: How do you imagine the waterfront will continue to change? Can you predict into the future?

02-00:28:55
Vrana: No. I don't enjoy it either. I don't feel like pontificating.

02-00:28:57
Moradi: Yeah. Is it a grim future?

02-00:29:05
Vrana: We have yet to see the consequence of the disasters of climate change on shipping, and I don't want to speculate about the changes in technology and stuff like that.

02-00:29:25
Moradi: I am curious with the emergence of like inland ports, like ports in Sacramento for instance, that are going — or in Stockton — that are growing further inland, do you think ports in Oakland or San Francisco, where there is real valuable real estate, will continue to be there?

02-00:29:53
Vrana: Well, very possibly not. Like right now there's a big move in the East Bay to wipe out one of the last commercial piers in order to build complexes of retail and housing that allegedly includes affordable housing, but it's not [affordable], and it's going on right now. The Howard Street terminal. And whether the union and community organizations are successful at stopping the Oakland A's and their ownership Lew[is] Wolff — that's actually a real estate guy who has parlayed ownership of a few sports teams and to accessing prime land in San Jose and Oakland — I mean that's kind of what's going on, so there's a battle going on in that regard.

02-00:31:03
Moradi: I want to change directions a little bit —

02-00:31:05
Vrana: Good, I just don't enjoy that.

02-00:31:07
Moradi: — that's fair — and talk a little bit about the Waterfront Writers. I met with Bob the other day and you know, caught up again and he had just gotten in touch with Dave Ramet. He had said something really interesting to me, in kind of a cryptic fashion, Bob said something along the lines of that he and Dave Ramet don't think that the Waterfront Writers ever existed, kind of, as a group or an entity that you can point to as a group. He often described it as like a "grouping" or an assemblage rather than as a formal group. Do you share that perspective?

02-00:31:57

Vrana: Well, I had very little to do with Dave Ramet. He got involved more after, if I remember, right after I had gone to Wisconsin. And I know that after I left, there [were] fewer gatherings of the group. I felt that the group functioned primarily for events and the role of those, you know, the readings and performances and exhibits at different places was what we were about. I don't know what alternative form of organization would have been more [politically or ideologically] meaningful, useful, [or] structured [as] measured against a political party. No, it was not a political party. I mean we had contacts with other groups and I think especially in the arts there's a fine line between groupings and organizations.

I think that one of the realities was that whatever [artistic] genre or medium that our people were creating in and that was somehow connected to their work-life was not the most central thing in their life. That's sort of what made [us] unique about the other worker-artists that we came into contact with, is that yes, you felt passionately about what you created, but you [also] got up and you went to work, and that experience informed the art that you did. It seemed to me those whose art did not relate to their work experience were not as successful in terms of being part of the group. That's what I mean by success, I mean in terms of being engaged in talking and all that. But that's a long way of saying [that] there was not — that's right! — there was not a formal organizational structure unless we were convened…and a few times for business purposes by Bob, when Bob took on leadership in terms of negotiating the contract with Harper & Row for the anthology. There were a couple of points where there was some friction of personality and it's hard to tell.

02-00:35:51

Moradi: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

02-00:35:54

Vrana: Not a whole lot. But to say that there were, that Bob — I don't think that everybody realized how central Bob put his position vis-à-vis the publisher and that his name was gonna be [under] the title of the book, and there was some resentment about that. And I think you mentioned last time, you asked about the conflict between clerks and the longshore. I don't think that that was a big deal, but it had emotional force. In other words, that the people who bought into that debate felt strongly about it, but the majority of people didn't feel that the group and what we were trying to do in the group had anything to do with it.

02-00:36:59

Moradi: How did that play out in a lot in the Waterfront Writers?

02-00:37:03

Vrana: I think I remember there being a couple of shouting matches.

02-00:37:07

Moradi: Really?

02-00:37:08
Vrana: Yeah. But right now I don't remember much detail about it at all. It was Herb Mills and I think Bob, but don't quote me on that. I mean, my memory is just kind of unclear about that, partly because of how I felt about it at the time. You know, like give it a rest, we're not fighting those battles here, what we're trying to do here is different. And then every time we did an event, it seemed to be a good thing. We struck a chord some place that a lot of people would come out to see us and listen to us. And it was not a lot of fun when it was media people.

02-00:38:16
Moradi: Why not?

02-00:38:17
Vrana: Well, they treated us, I think I said before, sort of like orangutans that read or something like that. You know, Gosh! Longshoremen doing this or whatever. So it was kind of a freak show kind of thing.

02-00:38:37
Moradi: Like shocking that these workers...

02-00:38:40
Vrana: Yeah. Some of the public radio shows we did, that was not the same, so I'm not putting all — [it was] the commercial media. And that didn't work really well.

02-00:38:55
Moradi: Did that lead to tensions between the group? Did that have reverberations for you all?

02-00:39:02
Vrana: Well, I think, I don't even remember how some people got to talk to the media and other people didn't. I don't quite remember. Sometimes it was because whoever was doing the article say, [for example they] liked somebody's writing and so that would be their access to the group, is through so-and-so's writing or art or something like that.

02-00:39:36
Moradi: But there was a distinction between who did or did not, or could or could not talk to the media?

02-00:39:45
Vrana: No, I mean not in that way. I'm trying to remember, I had a lot of other things going on aside from just the passage of time, I mean we're talking 40 years ago. But I'm thinking that it wasn't always clear who wanted to and who was available to talk to people, to respond to invitations, to go to a conference, or a couple of people go do a reading someplace. We did a couple of readings at

Potrero Neighborhood House, a couple of bookstores in San Francisco — City Lights and the one on Judah and Ninth Avenue, the name escapes me [NB: most likely Green Apple, on 9th Ave, two blocks north of Judah] — that were fun. And then the first ones we did, I think were the most fun of all, at least for me, at the Mandala, at the center by Bob's house, the folk dance center. And when we connected with the Vancouver folks and they invited some of us up, and then it's like can you go, you know? So just a few people went.

02-00:41:30
Moradi: You ended up going up once or twice.

02-00:41:32
Vrana: Yeah I went a couple of times.

02-00:41:33
Moradi: How was that? Do you remember?

02-00:41:35
Vrana: Oh, the first time was fine and it was great. It was great. You know, sitting and listening to Canadians talking about — they had more variety, they weren't just waterfront workers. I mean there were fisher folk and some healthcare workers, a welder, it was a broader representation of waterfront-based occupations than the ILWU longshore and clerks.

02-00:42:19
Moradi: And what did you think of that? What did you think of the Vancouver writers?

02-00:42:23
Vrana: I thought they were great. I thought that as a group they had a lot of skill, a lot of technical skill, and several of them were really evocative in their writing. So it was really a kick, you know, to think that they were doing something so similar, that their genesis had nothing to do with ours. Spontaneous generation, whatever it is. So that was neat. Anyway, getting to know them and then a couple of them came down to a couple of our readings, but just as individuals.

02-00:43:12
Moradi: Do you remember who came down?

02-00:43:15
Vrana: Mark Warrior and I think Kirsten Emmott, a doctor. She wrote about doctor life, doctor life and death.

02-00:43:36
Moradi: Do you remember your connections to folks like Mark Warrior, Kirsten Emmott? Were you ever in touch with Tom Wayman, for instance?

02-00:43:45
Vrana: Well Tom Wayman and I, we were in touch because, well he did I think two anthologies, one was for a journal which I forget and the other was a book

Going for Coffee, that he wanted to include a bunch of my stuff in. So we corresponded and then I was up there, spent time with him. We did more than that, but I just don't remember. When I say we did more, like we had sit-downs, and conversations, and all that.

02-00:44:29
Moradi: Do you remember what kind of politics the Vancouver writers held?

02-00:44:35
Vrana: It's hard to generalize but radical, anarcho-syndicalist, working-class based stuff.

02-00:44:52
Moradi: And how did that relate to [or] differ from the Waterfront Writers?

02-00:44:59
Vrana: I think ours was pretty similar. I mean, I think that we had some more traditional — we had some long-time union at the local level elected people, people who were heavily involved and committed to union politics, but that was a bit of a difference.

02-00:45:32
Moradi: Do you think the openness of the Waterfront Writers enabled — or well, were there folks outside of the Waterfront Writers who were women or people of color speaking at [or] performing at your events?

02-00:45:59
Vrana: [*pause*] Thinking hard. See, the last two years I wasn't around, the last two years I was in Wisconsin, so I can't speak to that time. In the beginning, no. Except for Frank. You know, we were just little white boys.

02-00:46:45
Moradi: [*laughter*] Do you remember there being discussions about getting folks, inviting or encouraging folks?

02-00:47:00
Vrana: I don't recall. Some of the guys, I think like Brian Nelson and Mike Vawter, I think were involved in some art shows that were put on at Local 10 that involved some of the African-American guys that were sculptors and painters. Whether that was like a joint Waterfront Writers–Local 10 thing, I can't tell you the institutional mechanism for doing it, but I have a memory of there being crossover, connection. [...] People who are doing art didn't always want to be connected with the Waterfront Writers. I mean, if they had been doing their art their whole life and exhibiting and stuff like that, you know, who knows. So there may have been, but I'm not aware today, I can't think of it.

02-00:48:23

Moradi: Did you keep up with any of the folks in the group when you moved to Wisconsin? Do you remember being in touch or following any of their happenings?

02-00:48:39
Vrana: Not really, but that's me. I deal with the people in front of my face and people that I feel good about that I don't see for a long time, when I see them I'm happy to see them. There were several people I felt that way about. I mentioned to you, I was pleased and surprised to hear from Frank when he got in touch regarding his exhibit and wanted to use my poetry for that because, you know, Frank was always one of my favorite people. So anyway...so I would put it on that level.

I went from being a single guy to being married with kids pretty quick, at that time, I mean during the time span of the Waterfront Writers. I just had a lot going on, and then the whole thing with injuries and leaving town and all that. So it just made it really hard to continue. And from a distance it seemed that the publication of the book, the Harper & Row book, was kind of the beginning of the end.

02-00:49:59
Moradi: In what way?

02-00:50:00
Vrana: People believing our press clippings, and not doing our art, and people quibbling over who got attention, or who seized attention.

02-00:50:20
Moradi: Do you remember who did seize the attention?

02-00:50:23
Vrana: I'm not going to talk about that, I don't want to. [*laughter*]

02-00:50:28
Moradi: No that's absolutely fair.

02-00:50:29
Vrana: There was more than one person and it just seemed to — I mean, egos happened. Because it was a time that I was moving away geographically, I couldn't really tell or do anything about what was happening.

02-00:51:00
Moradi: How did you feel about what was happening?

02-00:51:04
Vrana: Well, I felt that my own creative arc had come back to Earth. [*laughter*] 'cause I was just doing all of this family stuff and everything, and it just didn't have the same place for me, so I wasn't finding it. I knew some of the guys were still putting their own art together, and that was good, that was really

good. Bob kept writing diligently. Herb Mills kept writing diligently. Mike and Frank kept taking pictures. Brian, pictures and drawing. I mean, I knew they were doing stuff but in terms of finding public forums or ways to do it in the same way as a group, that seemed to dissipate. And I think that's the word for what happened: it dissipated. I don't think that there was a blow up. I think that if there were areas where there were differences about what the group should be doing or individuals should or should not be doing, it's that nobody wanted to fight about it, nobody wanted to make a big deal about it. It's just easier to let go and just continue doing what you're doing. You know, Mike and Brian [and Frank] worked on their video subsequently, I think they did something pretty special. Have you seen it?

02-00:52:57
Moradi: Yeah, the slideshow?

02-00:52:59
Vrana: Yeah.

02-00:52:59
Moradi: Yeah. It's phenomenal. It was in production for fifteen — they kept working on it for I think fifteen years, until the nineties.

02-00:53:09
Vrana: Yeah, well the technology kept changing it seemed, making possible some edits and stuff like that. 'cause I remember we had in the group and in the first iterations of the video that there was a group process and it was really cool to be part of that. They were so open about what they were doing and wanting input, comments, stuff like that. It felt like we were doing something in a group process that wasn't really ordinary. I have a vague memory of being at the meeting when Mike came in with, I don't know if he was just talking about himself or that he and Brian had found this incredible music, Pachelbel, to use as the soundtrack for the vintage photographs of the historical work process. You know, that was cool! 'cause we were talking about antecedents to our own work situation that we knew, and so how to bring it in a way that was emotionally evocative. And anyway, that was cool.

02-00:54:36
Moradi: Totally. Well, what sort of emotions were you interested in evoking with [the video]?

02-00:54:43
Vrana: Well, just the combination that it's not just, you know, the heroic worker, but the mix of pride and fear and frustration and politics and legacy, the whole mishmash.

02-00:55:07
Moradi: I remember you told me about you and Ken Fox's collaboration and now with this video, but were those sorts of collaborative projects common in the

group? Or, you know, criticism or constructive criticism across people's works?

02-00:55:22
Vrana: No, we did not criticize each other's work. It was like you want to get up and read it, you got ten minutes. But I think that it was kind of important that we did not get into criticism.

02-00:55:47
Moradi: Really?

02-00:55:48
Vrana: Well because I think that not everybody knew how to be constructive critics. And so I think we would have broken up sooner. [*laughter*] I think for a couple of the chapbooks, we got into some wrangling, because Bob made decisions, the final editorial decisions.

02-00:56:21
Moradi: Even in the chapbooks.

02-00:56:25
Vrana: I mean, we talked about them and talked about layout ideas, stuff like that. The second one, the glossy one with the photographs, we had more of a group conversation about that. I thought that was pretty cool. I think the photographers got more directly involved beyond just selecting the poetry.

02-00:56:52
Moradi: Do you remember what sort of message [or] politics you wanted to communicate in that chapbook? Did it differ from any of the former projects?

02-00:57:06
Vrana: Well it differed in terms — I think that was one we had a couple of people from Canada in that.

02-00:57:11
Moradi: That's right, yeah. I think Zoë Landale and I can't remember who else. David [Conn] I think is in that.

02-00:57:20
Vrana: So that was new. I think what we were writing about was a little more sophisticated. I think each of us had something in there that we had written after the group was formed, after the group came together, so it was just a little more complex in terms of the aspects of the work and union experience that snuck into the writing and photography.

02-00:57:59
Moradi: Do you remember how the group’s dissipation process, as you say it, how it dissipated? Or was that during your time in Wisconsin?

02-00:58:11

Vrana: It was during my time in Wisconsin. I think there was more dissension that took place after I was away than I'm aware of it. So that probably played more of a role than I'm aware of.

02-00:57:41
Moradi: And it does sound like the media's gaze on the group had an impact. There's this hastily — what appears to be, I'm making assumptions — but what appears to be a hastily typewritten letter from Herb Mills who expressed some deep frustrations about the media and how the group was represented in a newspaper I think. The letter doesn't detail much, but it sounds like real frustrations with media attention that led to his departure from the group. [...] I remember that you had mentioned that the group began to believe its own press. What did you mean by that?

02-00:59:47
Vrana: I think some of us did not produce material as good as we thought it was. I mean I would include myself in that. I think there were — I can't remember now — let's say I had fifty-seven [of] what I considered complete poems of which like forty-eight or fifty-two were published. That's enormous, that's fucking enormous!

02-01:00:28
Moradi: That's a whole anthology.

02-01:00:31
Vrana: To say that as a percentage of your work, a small body of work, almost all of which was published. [*laughter*] And I know that some of the stuff that I considered final was not really good. But I felt that it was complete, but it was not very good. And then there were several pieces that I thought I was doing something unusual, something unique that only I knew about. I don't like getting into discussion about poetics and stuff like that. But there were just ways that I was working with language that gave me a lot of pleasure, and that I could see, and maybe occasionally somebody else might see it, but I'd never felt the need to point at it, you know, to say this is what I did. But that's attributable to — that experimentation, I would call it — as limited as it was, was because of the group. There was something about having an audience that said like it's okay to try this. I only had one occasion, which I told you about, I only had one occasion and that was up in Vancouver, when the audience just looked at me like "What the fuck are you…"

02-01:02:31
Moradi: [*laughter*] I don't think you did tell me about that!

02-01:02:32
Vrana: I did, I did. It was when I tried to combine the themes, the red diaper papers with the waterfront writings.

02-01:02:47
Moradi: How did you live it down?

02-01:02:49

Vrana: Well, nobody else was around except there were about a dozen people there. I can't remember if it was Kirsten or Mark Warrior that MC'ed the event, it was at a bookstore in Vancouver. And apparently there was some huge cultural event that night elsewhere and they were apologetic because this event just sucked away the people that would have been coming to this reading. And then when I was done, I said, "Thank God." [*laughter*]

02-01:03:34

Moradi: Well I'm glad you got out of there without too much emotional trauma or embarrassment. [*pause*] I think those were all of the things I wanted to follow up on that I had lingering in my mind that I wanted to bug you about.

02-01:03:52

Vrana: Okay. If I was more clear in my memory about some of the discussions-slash-debates that we had within the group about the direction of the group, I'd feel easier [sharing]. But I'm just so unclear about who was saying what and even how much of it — 'cause also I tuned out a lot of that stuff. I was just in a place in my life where listening to people wrangling about politics and stuff like that, I didn't have a whole lot of patience for it.

02-01:04:34

Moradi: Yeah. And these are emotionally weighted memories and discussions. No, but I do appreciate you sharing like what you can and do share.