

Ben Singer
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies
University of Minnesota

November 24, 2017



The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by

Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

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- 1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ
2 Ben Singer -BS
3
4 AJ: So, hello.

5 BS: Hello.

6 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project
7 at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota Libraries. Today is November 24, 2017.
8 I am in Minneapolis, the day after Thanksgiving – so, it was a big family day yesterday. I am here
9 with Ben Singer. Do you prefer Dr. Ben Singer?

10 BS: Oh, it all depends on context. Right now, not . . . I feel like . . . yeah. It's nice that you
11 acknowledge that though.

12 AJ: Absolutely. So, how are you today, Ben?

13 BS: I'm doing all right.

14 AJ: Doing OK. Hey, listen, can you state your name, spell your name even though it's a fairly
15 common name and I think it's spelled in the most common of terms, but we want to make sure
16 we have it right. So, spell your name, then state your gender identity as it is today, and your
17 gender you were assigned at birth – and your pronouns. If you need to ask me to repeat any of
18 that, I absolutely will.

19 BS: So, my name . . . I just kind of want to put this on the record. Ben Singer is what I go by,
20 particularly in activist and friendship and social context, but I purposefully . . . when I was
21 thinking of changing my name legally, took my last name, which used to be Bensinger, all one
22 word, split it into two words. My former first name, the first initial was T, I used to use my first
23 name for a while, but that's another whole story about being gender confusing to people.

24 AJ: Right.

25 BS: So, my official name is T. Benjamin Singer, so on my documents it will say that. The T . . . people
26 will ask me, "What does that stand for?" And I've come up with a cute little reply which is a
27 trace of my former self because my former . . . T for trace, T for the former name, which I'm not
28 embarrassed to say, it's just a weird hybrid name that my family that lived in Illinois . . . but, I
29 think they're from the south. I don't have a lot of understanding of my family's history because
30 of estrangement. They called me Terralee and that is a slightly southernified, very unusual . . .
31 never met anybody by that name before, used it for a while when I was appearing very
32 masculine in the world and then had this kind of feminine name that people would ask me,
33 "What's your name?" So, I decided to keep the T, but I would advise anybody who decides to
34 change their name to not have a first initial because, unfortunately, I got called by the social
35 security agency and department of motor vehicles, "Mr. T." sometimes. They're like, "T is your
36 first . . .?" And then having arguments with the DMV about the fact that I changed my first
37 name to T and being like, "It's an initial, it's not a name."

38 AJ: Right.

- 1 BS: So, that's the story of my name. Name, gender identity?
- 2 AJ: Spelling of your name though too.
- 3 BS: OK, so the way I would like it spelled for this project is just B-e-n and last name Singer, S-i-n-g-e-
4 r.
- 5 AJ: OK.
- 6 BS: You can put that in the transcript. Gender identity has changed over the course of the years
7 based on what's been historically available. At this point, even though it's the age of the non-
8 binary individual, I still use trans . . . trans guy, trans man, because to me that marks a particular
9 moment in history when that identity became available and say FTM, which was used
10 previously, kind of went out of fashion. I always kind of had a problem with being reduced to,
11 first of all, a binary female to male, and second of all, an acronym. I just didn't think it was a
12 way that we were really going to . . . I don't know, I lost my train of thought. So, what was the
13 rest of your question – you said you would repeat them?
- 14 AJ: Your gender identity . . .
- 15 BS: So, I was assigned female at birth and current gender identity, as I said, trans man/trans guy.
16 And, I think you asked me pronouns – he/him/his is what I use.
- 17 AJ: Yeah. Where did you grow up?
- 18 BS: I grew up in northern Illinois for a while. I was born in northern Illinois – I think I lived there for
19 the first five years of my life.
- 20 AJ: Like DeKalb?
- 21 BS: No, Sterling, Illinois.
- 22 AJ: Sterling . . .
- 23 BS: So, there's three cities – Sterling, Rock Falls, Dixon. They're within like 10 miles of each other.
24 Dixon is most well-known as the hometown of Ronald Reagan if that gives you any idea of what
25 type of political climate I grew up in.
- 26 AJ: Yeah.
- 27 BS: Northern Illinois, Midwest.
- 28 AJ: So, what was it like? Did you have siblings? Did you have an intact family? Did your family
29 move around a lot? What was it like growing up?
- 30 BS: This is kind of why I didn't want to do the interview because talking about my family . . . I've
31 been estranged from everyone in my family for a good 25 years.
- 32 AJ: Wow, I'm really sorry to hear that, Ben.
- 33 BS: I don't know if I experience it as a loss, because in many ways it didn't ever feel like it was a
34 place where I felt a sense of belonging and love. And, in fact, there was a lot of abuse –

1 particularly coming from my father. And then living in this small town where all I knew was
2 what I didn't feel comfortable being. I didn't have any options for a kind of more positive
3 relationship to what I could be, so a lot of my childhood was more like avoiding situations than it
4 was actually . . . the typical trans narrative is, "I always knew." I didn't always know, I just knew I
5 didn't feel right and I just knew that something was off and it wasn't just the abuse, but that was
6 part of it. So, no, I haven't had any contact with family. There was mother, father, and two
7 siblings. However, my sisters weren't born until I was . . . my one sister wasn't born until I was 5
8 and the other one two years later. So, five and seven years difference was kind of a big gap and
9 it made me an only child for a while, a long-enough while that I guess I formed a lot of my early
10 experiences either being an only child or also being very much in isolation because it was a
11 relatively rural area and I don't remember even having that many friends before I went to
12 school. So, I spent a lot of time alone, which kind of meant, in my head, that the world could be
13 anything I wanted it to be. And even though I didn't typically get asked the gender question, but
14 I didn't really know what gender was.

15 AJ: Yeah.

16 BS: Often times, people say that by age 2 every child has a sense of gender identity and, to be
17 honest, I really didn't. I knew what I didn't like to do and I knew what I liked to do. The other
18 thing I want to say about gender is people think of small towns as being places where gender
19 binary is kind of intensified so that there's girly-girls and there are boys who are boys, but I also
20 want to point out that in a kind of rural working-class area, and my family was both working
21 class . . . it was a mixed class, so kind of working class, lower middle class, depending on which
22 side of the family. I recall my aunts and uncles being farmers and plumbers, etc. There was kind
23 of a standard uniform for anyone that did physical labor – it was overalls. So, everybody was
24 wearing overalls – I had overalls. It was just kind of licensed to be gender . . . now, it's called
25 gender neutral, but at the time it was just like the uniform you wear when you're doing the
26 work. And then I would realize that on Sundays, when people would get dressed to go to
27 church, all of a sudden the women in the family would be wearing clothes that I'd never seen
28 before and doing their hair and their face and their make-up, which they never do while they're
29 working. They get up at 6:00 in the morning, they milk the cows, they do the chores, they get
30 dirty and they're not bothering to get dressed up, and on Sundays it was like all of a sudden
31 gender came out. I was like, "What happened? What are these people doing?" Because most
32 of the week it didn't seem like there was much of a difference between so-called girls and boys.

33 AJ: That's a pretty interesting story. Now, it's important that I mention on the top that you are a
34 doctor . . .

35 BS: Of philosophy. I used to make the joke that once I got my Ph.D. I could start prescribing
36 hormones. People didn't get the joke but I was like, "I'm a doctor now."

37 AJ: But you study transgender health, transgender ethnographies.

38 BS: I have. And also, history and politics, theory, just in terms of . . .

39 AJ: Activism and theory, yeah. So, you know, that distinction that you made around people living in
40 rural areas versus, I suspect . . . I don't think you said this, but versus urban areas, right?

- 1 BS: Yeah.
- 2 AJ: And how people might anticipate gender being sort of the binary times two in rural settings and
3 it's quite the opposite. What other insights have you gained about the trans identity in your
4 studies that is sort of as enlightening as that one?
- 5 BS: Oh, boy – that's the huge question, right? First of all, the first narrative I talked about, which is
6 very personal, it had as much to do with class as it had to do with rural versus urban.
- 7 AJ: Sure.
- 8 BS: There were people in my town who were like pretty upscale ladies . . . there were a few, there
9 weren't that many wealthy people. I considered them rich because they had big houses and
10 their bathrooms were indoors, but they were always dressed – gendered, in a very kind of
11 feminine way.
- 12 AJ: Sure.
- 13 BS: So, it's as much about class as it is about urban/rural. I knew there were gendered people
14 around, I just didn't know them in my immediate family.
- 15 AJ: Sure.
- 16 BS: What is my big insight about gender through, when it comes to my research and my activism?
17 I'm at a loss at this point. I mean, one of the things that I've talked about in my work, and I'm
18 not sure how to make this a point that I can convey to a lot of people . . . it doesn't sound all
19 that revolutionary, but one of the things that I started to notice about the category transgender,
20 which has just sort of been taken for granted at this point, as an umbrella term – to encompass
21 all sexual and gender variance. A) I know from personal experience and activism, that people
22 who are being included under the umbrella often times don't want to be.
- 23 AJ: That's true.
- 24 BS: We don't talk about that a lot. I had a very public moment where I was using the umbrella as a
25 kind of activist tool and writing to our local gay paper, because they were extremely transphobic
26 at the time. This was in the middle of the 1990s, and then had a drag queen write back and I'd
27 included drag queens under the umbrella, write back and literally transphobically tear me apart
28 and say, "I am not one of these f'ing trannies, don't ever call me that." And so, I was like, "Oh,
29 this isn't just a take-it-for-granted thing."
- 30 AJ: Exactly.
- 31 BS: Knowing too . . . I mean, my mentor, David Valentine who is at the UW-M, and also from my
32 own activist experience . . .
- 33 AJ: David Allentine?
- 34 BS: David Valentine.
- 35 AJ: Valentine.

1 BS: So, his book *Imagining Transgender* makes the argument that . . . and I think it's increasingly
2 becoming not as true, that sexuality and gender that kind of white, middle-class activists
3 understand as semi-distinct, in some communities of color you have folks saying, "I'm gay," and
4 it's someone who may be placed under the umbrella but they may or may not identify as such,
5 as transgender. Right? So, I'm thinking about . . . if you look at the film *Paris is Burning*, femme
6 queens. So, femme queens are now getting constantly slotted, even getting re-translated as
7 trans women, some of whom say . . . so, let me be more coherent. We did an early needs
8 assessment study in Philadelphia because we finally realized the city wasn't going to re-direct
9 any resources towards any trans folks and any trans projects unless we could substantiate need.
10 We had this kind of laundry list of terms that people could check off or they could right in,
11 "other." We also had sex assigned at birth, current gender identity as the two ways by which . . .
12 if there was a discordance between the two if they didn't match, right – if they weren't in
13 alignment according to cultural norms. So, we had people saying, "I'm assigned male at birth,"
14 and then, "My current gender identity is man."

15 AJ: Right.

16 BS: But, who also dressed up to go to the house and ball competitions and were femme queens.

17 AJ: Like full hair, make-up, the whole nine yards.

18 BS: So, this two-step method which now is pervasive in public health didn't really work to identify
19 those folks as under this trans umbrella. I don't feel like this has ever been a problem that's . . . I
20 mean, I don't feel like this has been an issue that has been solved through . . . the only way to
21 solve it is to allow people to identify in their own terms. When it comes to interfacing with the
22 governments who rely on demographic categories, or even the form that you asked for – you're
23 looking for what's called discordance. So, why am I saying this? A) Because the umbrella, to
24 me, has its limitations, the way of thinking about trans as an umbrella term has its limitations. A
25 lot of things get placed under there too. If people want to identify as such, I think that's really
26 important that they get to self-identify.

27 AJ: Sure.

28 BS: But, when folks like two-spirit, for example, are being put automatically under the umbrella
29 when I think that in first nations and Native communities, sex and gender systems may just be
30 very different than European colonial sex and gender systems.

31 AJ: Right.

32 BS: That we need to respect that maybe there is not just an automatic inclusion because it's like
33 who is doing the including? Who wants to be included? That's one thing, but who is just kind of
34 in a subsumptive manner just including everybody and everything, I think that's really
35 problematic. The other thing that I started to notice when I was doing my research, which was
36 actually originally supposed to be on the history of trans-specific public health or public health
37 that involves trans identities and bodies in some way. What kept coming up was the problem of
38 classification, first of all – how do you define this "population"? Even population itself is kind of
39 singular and not plural. But, what I saw transgender doing was just completely exploding any
40 notion of unification – particularly in the ways in which people were coming up with more and

1 more identity types. The more that folks could disentangle sex from gender, from sexuality, the
2 more it seemed like they had to have . . . and I'm for this, I'm not trying to discount this . . .

3 AJ: No, no, no.

4 BS: I'm just trying to point out what I saw happening in and through the category of transgender,
5 queer was doing this, to a degree, like queer was proliferating the ways in which you could be
6 different in the world.

7 AJ: Identify yourself, yeah.

8 BS: People were talking about different types of queerness, including in the 1990s when gender
9 queer became a thing – and that then became a type of queerness that brought gender variance
10 back into the equation, I think precisely because transgender was starting to sort it out. Gender
11 variance has always been a part of gay and lesbian cultures whether they've been trans or not,
12 trans inclusive or not. The fact that transgender, when it became more well-known kind of
13 forced people to decide, "Is my gender more important or is my sexuality?" I think that was a
14 time when gender queer had its ascendancy because it kind of allowed people to put those two
15 things back together. Now, we're in the era of the non-binary individual and it's sort of . . .
16 gender queer is an outmoded term all of a sudden. But, what I see is just this continual, through
17 what I'm calling a transgender matrix, is this continual production of more and more specific
18 types. I don't think there's a problem with that, but there becomes a problem with that when
19 you're dealing with rigid entities like public health which say, "Now we need to classify all these
20 things and they all need to be unified in some way for us to do this study."

21 AJ: So, male, female or transgender.

22 BS: Well, and that's got its own problem, right? It's like Black, white, other. It's like - well, you know,
23 the government has actually got many racial categories now that one can choose from but it
24 took a long time to get there. I remember when I was running a public health program in
25 Philadelphia, it was a trans-specific one but we had to classify Hispanic as either Black or white.
26 So, even there, the problem of classification and categorization emerged and the same is true
27 for trans. It's one thing to say we can identify in all of these varied ways that keep multiplying
28 and proliferating in our social words, to the point that students have names for themselves that
29 I don't even understand what they're saying. And then I'm like, "Please educate me," in reverse.
30 It's one thing to have that and it's another thing to have to interface with these very
31 conservative institutions that require that everything be consolidated, that categories be
32 coherent, discreet, and consolidated. That's the opposite of the way I see transgender actually
33 phenomenologically operating in the world.

34 AJ: Phenomenologically. Hey, listen, you mentioned that you identify as a trans guy . . .

35 BS: I'm less guy these days than ever, just because . . . well, guy is one thing, that's kind of a
36 colloquial . . . man is the problem. The category man . . . if there's not a trans in front of man, I
37 don't want to have anything to do with it. I don't feel like I've had that experience. I've had
38 people try to convince me that I've been socialized as a man and I'm like, "Actually, my
39 experience now, in retrospect, has always been trans – as in, I've always had trouble with
40 whatever category . . . whatever normative category I've been placed in, I've had some kind of

- 1 trouble fitting into it to the degree that if it's not modified by trans, which literally means
2 moving across and cutting across and has a sense of movement in it. So, asking me to have a
3 static identity versus let's talk about all the different possibilities for identification, which have
4 been available to me in my lifetime – two or three. I was enticed to identify as transsexual, that
5 didn't fit because it seemed very medicalized to me. I was then doing political activism in the
6 era of FTMs and, again, I've already told you what my problems with that kind of binary-based
7 and just the fact that our lives are reduced to an acronym seemed problematic to me. And then,
8 trans man became a thing and I've stuck with that, but I'm not so enamored by the man portion
9 of that. It doesn't seem to fit very well.
- 10 AJ: I was going to ask, when is the first time you realized, and I know you said it wasn't, "I've always
11 been . . ." but when did you realize that you were not the gender you were assigned at birth?
- 12 BS: Well, I don't know that I ever realized I was the gender I was assigned at birth, the sex I was
13 assigned at birth – that's the thing. I didn't really get it. And early on . . . at the same time,
14 there were stories, and I don't have a lot of memory about my early days because trauma
15 actually plays a role in forgetting a lot of what happened back then, whether it was the family
16 trauma or the living in a small town, claustrophobic trauma that I felt. But, what I do know is
17 there was a story, and I was going to bring a picture because it's almost a cliché, of me, probably
18 for the last time, being somewhat coerced into a dress. Again, Sundays – church days, it was . . .
19 I have the picture so now it's vivid in my memory but only because I have the picture. A brown
20 plaid with lace collar, little girl dress – going to church dress with the lace socks, short socks –
21 bobby socks, and black patent leather shoes.
- 22 AJ: Wow.
- 23 BS: So, they forced me into this dress and the . . . I negotiated with them, I was getting really good.
- 24 AJ: How old do you think you were?
- 25 BS: I must have been about five. I was sitting next to my grandmother, that's another story . . .
26 about the only person who gave me permission, really, to be who I was without words. But, I
27 was sitting next to my grandmother and what I negotiated was that I could wear my holster and
28 hold my gun. So, I'm wearing this dress and I've got this holster . . . like leather, Western holster
29 on and this red plastic squirt gun that didn't even match the holster, it wasn't even the right
30 kind of gun to go in the holster, and I'm in this dress smiling next to my grandmother. And that's
31 the only way they'd get me to wear the dress. And, the quote that they repeated back to me,
32 this is the family story, was that I said, "I'm not wearing that damn hanging dress."
- 33 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 34 BS: So, there was something about wearing a dress . . . you think about a dress hanging on a body
35 and there's just this vulnerability – because it's open at the bottom, right.
- 36 AJ: Sure.
- 37 BS: I used to convince my mom that I had to wear pants under the dress so I could go to school and
38 go upside down on the bars that kids hang from.

- 1 AJ: The monkey bars or whatever.
- 2 BS: Yeah. And, it wouldn't be embarrassing. But, really it was for my comfort. It was some way to
3 get pants on me, I couldn't stand to have that area just exposed to the world.
- 4 AJ: Just flying in the wind.
- 5 BS: So, there was something about being forced into that gender that was associated with that
6 clothing that just felt extremely not right, but also just vulnerable to me. I don't mean to say
7 femininity . . . this is just my experience as a child. I don't want to say that femininity can't be
8 powerful, can't be non-vulnerable, can't be all of these kind of strength-based ways of
9 experiencing it, it just wasn't what I experienced as a child. What I experienced as a child was
10 that that was the way in which you were the most vulnerable in the world and it just didn't
11 seem to fit. I was also protecting myself from all kinds of intrusions, whether it was the abuse in
12 the family or other stuff, so I think it just made sense. My experience of gender, this is the way I
13 can put it more succinctly, was just of not having a relationship to it. It was everything that I
14 was supposed to be, I felt like I wasn't. But, what I could be, I didn't know and I just had this big
15 question mark in my head. I had an abiding sense that there was something else, but I'd never
16 seen it, I'd never experienced it, and I didn't know what it was, and I yearned for it at the same
17 time.
- 18 AJ: Wow.
- 19 BS: So, it wasn't until my 30s . . . I went through this what were the available categories that seemed
20 to work and what were the available identities and it was also in a social context – I think that's
21 the other thing we don't think about, is that gender doesn't exist in isolation, it's in relation. So,
22 when I went away to college in my late teens, early 20s, and University of Wisconsin-Madison,
23 for better or worse, had an extremely active lesbian-separatist, radical lesbian, cultural feminist .
24 . . you name it, all those words kind of aligned, community. And the irony was, the uniform
25 tended to be androgynous, so it was flannel shirts . . . kids these days think they've discovered
26 the flannel shirt aesthetic but it's like, "No, that's 1980s, at least," and working-class culture
27 forever. So, flannel shirts and work boots. So, I was like, "Good, this works for me." And a
28 leather jacket – right? This was the 1980s, and that was the aesthetic. I was like, "That works, I
29 can wear that." The politics, I took up because I didn't know what else. In retrospect, extremely
30 transphobic politics and probably also because most of these folks were white and didn't have
31 much of a racial consciousness or a consciousness of . . . it was all middle class too, which is
32 something that I . . . in college, I had a really hard time coming to terms with because I didn't
33 understand what it meant to really be middle class. So, all of that led to taking on a butch dyke
34 identity and I don't, in retrospect, deny that. I lived in and through that and I know a lot of trans
35 guys who say, "Oh, this was a phase." I think I gave it as good of a try as I could have. I do
36 remember . . .
- 37 AJ: It was real.
- 38 BS: It was real, but there was a little bit extra and I remember . . . it was actually here in Minneapolis
39 in the middle 1980s. I was dating somebody up here so I would drive from Madison to come up
40 here on weekends. We went to this diner, I don't know if it still exists, but it was a lesbian-run

- 1 diner and you'd go there and there would just be lesbians . . . it was Sunday and instead of going
2 to church we'd go to the lesbian diner. I remember I was with my girlfriend who was very
3 femme and I was very butch. I remember walking out and somebody said to her, not to me,
4 "That's never looked right on anybody except that person." It was an extremely . . . probably
5 butch-phobic, transphobic statement to be making, but it was all about . . . the subtext to me
6 was, "Butch usually seems forced on women but in that case it seems to fit." And, the fit part
7 was like, "Oh, yeah, because I'm feeling this." Not that butch . . . I'm getting into rough territory
8 here. Butches feel their identities just as deeply and just as much. I think what I was feeling was
9 my sense of self, kind of centered in my sense of self, in a way that I wasn't really forcing it. In
10 many cases, I was trying to hide it a little bit. I felt like it was shameful and it wasn't something I
11 wanted to bring out in public. It was something, again – identity being relational, that I could
12 only have with my girlfriends it seemed like, and in private, to the fullest extent. That was the
13 only time that I could even entertain the possibility of the thought of having what now we call a
14 male identity of some sort. Because, in the days of lesbian feminism of that time, that was
15 about colluding with the enemy.
- 16 AJ: Right.
- 17 BS: That was about being a dupe of the patriarchy. Even butch-femme relationships back then were
18 still questioned as being imitative of heterosexuality.
- 19 AJ: Sure.
- 20 BS: And didn't have a validity in their own right. So, to be thinking in any way, "I'm somehow male
21 identified . . ." (phone interrupts)
- 22 AJ: To the extent that you feel comfortable, Ben, can you talk about what medical interventions you
23 have undertaken, considering, have plans for in your gender journey?
- 24 BS: Is that a question that you're asking most people?
- 25 AJ: I'm asking everybody.
- 26 BS: OK, just wondering. So, that's actually . . . I guess it depends on context. If my doctor is asking
27 me, it might be important.
- 28 AJ: Sure.
- 29 BS: So, I don't know if it's obvious that I've been on hormones for quite a while. To me, that was . . .
30 so the social transition was . . . actually just getting the word trans, well transgender at the time,
31 was phenomenally . . .
- 32 AJ: Transformative.
- 33 BS: Important – yes. The word itself, as much as I have kind of a mixed relationship with that word,
34 getting the word in the first place was kind of like getting a diagnosis.
- 35 AJ: I was going to say the same thing – it kind of is, right.

1 BS: It's a necessary portal, right. Maybe it doesn't continue to fit, but at the time it becomes a way
2 to a different state of being in the world and a different way of thinking about one's body and
3 life. So, the medical interventions are kind of the same thing, right. At the time, they were a
4 really big deal and now they're kind of starting to fade into the background. I can't imagine
5 being myself without them, but I also don't feel like I think about them as the definer of who I
6 am or the sum total of everything I've experienced. But, they certainly . . . so, for example, I was
7 extremely rigid about my masculinity before starting the hormones and then . . . I'll say I had top
8 surgery because I think that that's pretty common, it's probably the most common surgery if
9 you're going to have one, even though people who don't go on hormones and want top surgery
10 – and there's even butches who want top surgery, it's just a thing. So, those two things really
11 made the most qualitative difference in my life and the difference that I felt like they made was
12 not . . . look, I lived for at least 15 years as a highly visible female-bodied masculine person,
13 including having violence directed at me, people yelling and throwing things out of cars,
14 someone telling me they were going to kill me. I mean, just . . . you name it. I didn't feel as
15 though I was transitioning to get away from that. I did this thing called the Desert Island
16 Experience – it was like, "Would I transition if I lived on a desert island and nobody knew?"
17 "Yes, I'm really uncomfortable in my body." I did experience dysphoria. I know everybody
18 doesn't have that experience and I know a lot of people don't like that concept, but it's just
19 basically being really uncomfortable in the body that you're in. I was super uncomfortable in
20 that body from the time that I hit puberty.

21 AJ: Wow.

22 BS: So, to relieve some of that dysphoric feeling and to also be able to loosen up when it came to
23 having a kind of masculine presentation in the world . . . I mean, I felt more free to be expressive
24 and to be less . . . even to the point of not trying to modulate or change my voice. Just whatever
25 I was given because of the hormones, I'm just going to use that. It didn't matter – I didn't want
26 to try to lower my voice or make my voice higher, it was just let's use my voice, I can now speak.
27 So, yeah, I think I'm just trying to change the question slightly to make it more meaningful to me
28 in terms of what it did.

29 AJ: Absolutely.

30 BS: What did it do to actually use these technologies, and you know, when I started the physical
31 part of transition, it was the early 1990s. There were very few places to go and certainly not
32 where I was living, which was in Philadelphia. There was this underground, maybe a couple
33 doctors. The first doctor that gave me hormones actually sexually molested me.

34 AJ: Oh, no.

35 BS: We had a price to pay every time we entered these contexts. I didn't go back to him and I
36 actually became an activist, not just because of my own experience but because of all the
37 horrific stories I'd heard about other trans folks – like accessing health care or not, being left to
38 die on a curb. Then there were the stories about people who were dying and I started to figure
39 out, you know, that we need to do something about this. So, it was never easy to access these
40 things, plus economically I was in college and I was using student loan money to pay for
41 surgeries and to get hormones – none of this stuff was covered by insurance and still isn't in a

- 1 lot of cases. But, it felt necessary. It felt necessary to kind of loosen up my life a little bit so that
2 I could actually be in my life more. I didn't like to speak in public before that, I didn't like to do a
3 lot of the things that I do now when I physically feel able because I just wasn't in a body that I
4 felt like I wanted to be in front of people in. Relationships were hard, they still are but for
5 different reasons.
- 6 AJ: I want to talk about that in a little bit. Do you remember who is the first trans person that you
7 met?
- 8 BS: Not met, but I saw a talk show and I was like . . .
- 9 AJ: Oh, really.
- 10 BS: I actually have a story before that though, when I was still this raging radical feminist - a
11 misguided person in Madison. I went into a bookstore one day and on the for-sale table, so they
12 were literally fifty cents, which I felt like I could afford, there was one book and it was on the
13 North American Man/Boy Love Association.
- 14 AJ: NAMBLA.
- 15 BS: NAMBLA – remember that?
- 16 AJ: Yes.
- 17 BS: I remember being like, “I need to know about this because this is what I’m against,” so I need to
18 know about this. There was another book by Leslie Lawstein called *Female to Male*
19 *Transsexuals*. And, I was drawn to this book and I was like, “I need to know about that too – it’s
20 one of those things that I’m against politically.” So, the one book just kind of languished on my
21 shelf, NAMBLA right, I read it a little bit. And then the other book, *Female to Male Transsexuals*,
22 I couldn't even open it. I couldn't open it for years. I felt like the book was just taboo, but I just
23 kept taking it wherever I moved. Then I read it and I'm like, “This is terrible, this is the most
24 transphobic medicalized nonsense.” But, at the time, I was drawn to these two books . . . so, it
25 wasn't so much about being a person, it was about concepts that just seem so either politically
26 corrupt in terms of my . . . the political melee that I was in or that, for example, the one book
27 that I was afraid of, the *Female to Male Transsexual* book, I had a split feeling of like – I'm
28 repelled by this and, at the same time, I'm inexplicably drawn to it and I didn't know why. So,
29 the first trans guy, I'll say, because I actually remember . . . my parents didn't go many places in
30 their life, but I remember one time they took a trip to New Orleans and they came back and I
31 remember, as a child, overhearing a conversation and I realized later they were either talking
32 about a drag queen or somebody who was dressing . . . someone who was assigned female at
33 birth but dressing feminine or trans feminine. I just remember being baffled by what they were
34 talking about, but fascinated at the same time. I was like, “What is this?” And then later, in the
35 early 1980s, on the little black and white television, I was watching *Geraldo* and a guy . . . he had
36 a panel of trans people . . . it's such a sexist moment, in retrospect, but Geraldo went up to this
37 trans guy and put his hand on his shoulder and said, “I don't understand these other trans
38 women, why would anyone want to be a woman?”
- 39 AJ: Is that right?

- 1 BS: And he was like, "But I understand you, you're a guy and you want to be a guy. I get that." But,
2 for me it was more like, "That's possible?" I knew trans women at that point were possible
3 because radical feminists were saying that they were making a mockery of women, that's why
4 Sylvia Rivera was kept from the stage in 1973 or . . . 1979. So, I knew about that but I didn't
5 know trans men or trans masculine people or FTMs, at the time, were even possible. Seeing
6 Jason Cromwell, who I later met, on the *Geraldo* show was extremely . . .
- 7 AJ: Jason Cromel?
- 8 BS: Jason Cromwell.
- 9 AJ: Cromwell.
- 10 BS: He, I believe, still lives in Seattle and he even got a Ph.D. in Anthropology, but never ended up in
11 academia. Those of us in the early days, there was no such thing as trans studies, there were no
12 jobs. So, I ended up meeting him years later and then I remember when I moved to
13 Philadelphia, I finally got a word . . . *Stone Butch Blues* came out. This is a long story, I'm going
14 to try to make it really short.
- 15 AJ: OK.
- 16 BS: Because that's basically a de-transition narrative, that's a narrative where the author transitions
17 only to at the end say, "Oh, I went through all that, but I really found a home in the lesbian
18 community."
- 19 AJ: *Stone Butch Blues*?
- 20 BS: Yes. *Stone Butch Blues* was kind of the de-transition narrative or the kind of . . . I've now gone
21 through that and now I see I have a place in this community, but it wasn't a trans narrative. I
22 just picked out the parts that worked for me and then ended up calling Les Feinberg on the
23 phone, just literally out of the phone book, and saying, "I don't know what to do and I don't
24 know where to go, but your book is the only thing I have." A lot of people were coming to an
25 awareness of trans identity through that book at the time, particularly white trans masculine
26 people. So, Les was like, "Well, you can go to the Gender Identity Center in New York, there's
27 places to go." I didn't end up doing any of that. I ended up just becoming politically active, but I
28 do know that I was looking around and searching around and trying to find people in Philly.
29 There was nobody, I didn't know a single trans person in Philadelphia in the early to mid-1990s.
30 I heard about this trans guy, at the time, and, in fact, I don't think he remained identifying as
31 that, but at the time he did, and somehow got in touch with him. We met, and before we met,
32 we were in the same room together. Kate Bornstein had come to speak at a bookstore there,
33 she'd just came out with her first book. I just remember seeing him across . . .
- 34 AJ: *Gender Outlaw*?
- 35 BS: Yeah. I remember seeing this guy across the room and I just couldn't stop taking secret looks.
36 But, we didn't get to meet that day. It was later and . . . there wasn't even a group. I found out
37 later there was a group of trans guys meeting in the suburbs and you had to have a secret . . .
38 like you had to know somebody and then they had to give you a number to call and then you

- 1 had to get permission by getting the address to come there. I later convinced some members of
2 that group to get the group to start meeting in a publicly-available space, which first was a trans
3 guy, it was a chiropractor's office, and then later it was at the community center. But, I just kept
4 having to convince them to come more and more into the open so people could actually use the
5 group as a resource – but that's how afraid they were.
- 6 AJ: Yeah.
- 7 BS: There was also this incredibly large group outside of Philadelphia, in King of Prussia, of
8 crossdressers. It's called Renaissance and that organization existed for many, many years – a
9 little bit like Virginia Prince's Tri-Ess group in the south.
- 10 AJ: And didn't they do a magazine and a conference somewhere.
- 11 BS: They did a magazine, they had a conference. I went to the conference and was one of five trans
12 guys who were literally outnumbered and huddled in corner. We would just find each other at
13 these events – there was two to five of us at any possible event and we were completely
14 outnumbered. These days of trans masculine and trans male ascendancy where we're
15 everywhere, but the younger folks just don't understand that at the time the balance was just so
16 incredibly shifted. But, it was also shifted in terms of race and class. A lot of those cross
17 dressers were living as male in their everyday life – they didn't actually identify as trans a lot of
18 them. Some of them did, but a lot of them didn't.
- 19 AJ: A lot of them didn't.
- 20 BS: And, a lot of them were actually quite transphobic. They were just like, "I'm just a guy that likes
21 to wear dresses." So, they had a lot of class and race . . .
- 22 AJ: And, that was kind of Renaissance, right?
- 23 BS: I'm not saying everybody because Angela Gardner, who ran it, was a bi and became like a trans-
24 identified woman and she was actually very politically active and was always dressing as
25 feminine, so she had that experience.
- 26 AJ: Angela . . .?
- 27 BS: Angela Gardner.
- 28 AJ: Gardner.
- 29 BS: Gardner. And, her politics, as far as I was concerned, were much better than the majority of the
30 other folks in the organization. It was also very interesting because you'd go to their conference
31 and 99% of the workshops were, "How to Put on Make-up," and, "How to Talk a Certain Way,"
32 and, "How to Walk a Certain Way." I'm like, "We need a political workshop." So, I had a
33 political workshop right next to . . . and like five people came. Five people came to my
34 workshop on trans politics and there were 500 people right in the next room learning make-up
35 tips. And that's how those conferences went. There was a point at which I started meeting with
36 this guy . . . so, this was east coast activism. Actually, I took some of my student loan money to

- 1 fly out to San Francisco because they had FTM International, which was the first organization in
2 this country networked. It was started by a gay trans man named Lou Sullivan.
- 3 AJ: Right.
- 4 BS: He was gay in a day before when it would even disqualify you for even physical transitioning. He
5 started this newsletter in the beginning and just sent them all around the country – he typed
6 them on a piece of paper, and then eventually started this organization. I would fly out there on
7 my breaks with my student loan money to see what the future could look like. And then I'd go
8 back to Philly. They would say things to me that were very patronizing, like, "Oh, you should do
9 XYZ." And I'm like, "You don't understand. You're living on the gender frontier and I'm living on
10 the gender front lines." It's like, "You don't understand the battles we're fighting." I kind of
11 learned that all politics – it's local and it's organic and it is made up of the elements of what you
12 have to work with where you're at. So, I took a different route. On the east coast, I started to
13 organize around trans health activism, broadly defined. People were like, "Why not
14 employment?" I'm like, "Because health is really every aspect of our life – it's economic, it's
15 freedom from violence." It's basically the way the World Health Organizations defines health –
16 very broadly. And, so I felt . . .
- 17 AJ: The food we eat, the air we breathe.
- 18 BS: It covers everything – from the kind of violence that trans women were facing to the kind of
19 exclusions that we were experiencing or worse, in medical contexts, to the fact that none of us
20 could get employment – there were four jobs in the city and they were all HIV-outreach
21 workers, the lowest on the totem pole, low paid and only four people in the city.
- 22 AJ: Yes, high stress.
- 23 BS: Exactly. So, that was my way of trying to address . . . on the west coast they were trying to do
24 this more social organizing and social groups, but I kind of thought we needed to address social
25 issues and inequities more directly.
- 26 AJ: Did you do that work in conjunction with organizations or was this sort of solo? Did you found
27 organizations to do some of this work?
- 28 BS: Yes, stop there because that's going to be like a 20-minute answer.
- 29 AJ: Yes.
- 30 BS: At first, I would just go to other organization's events and yell at them and basically what I got
31 was scapegoated. I realized, because I was one of the only ones who was willing to be public, I
32 just had to take it, but I would always try to get people to go with me and it really wasn't until . .
33 . and this is where movement building and collective action is really important. It wasn't until a
34 group of people would go and yell at them, that they would actually listen and realize that they
35 needed to be held accountable. I, instead, got scapegoated as that . . . whatever they wanted to
36 call me at the end of the day.
- 37 AJ: Angry person.

- 1 BS: With a bad attitude, right. That angry trans person. But, I would just go to groups and
2 continually tell them what they needed to be doing and get up and disrupt things because they
3 said they were already doing it. Then you would tack the T on – there was one point at which . .
4 . so, what I did was I did found the first pure-based . . . I co-founded . . . let me back up a second.
5 In 1996, the first . . . I organized with a very, very large organizing committee – almost too large,
6 but we needed, what I felt like, was a lot of diversity. So, I was basically knocking on doors and
7 later really pulling trans folks mostly, and some committed allies, into this organizing
8 committee. We organized the first public event in Philadelphia and ended up drawing about
9 200 people from across . . . up and down the east coast, but also people came from as far away
10 as the Midwest. People were just desperate to meet with each other. It was called Bridges to
11 Coalition: A Community Forum on Trans Issues. I asked Les Feinberg to be the keynote speaker
12 knowing full well that Leslie Feinberg had a public persona and awareness that could draw
13 people to the event that otherwise wouldn't come, and it worked. I also got every politically
14 progressive and/or radical organization in Philly to commit to sending five people as a co-
15 sponsorship gesture. We didn't want their money, we didn't need their money, but what we
16 needed . . . because we did this all on the cheap. We didn't pay anything for the space, did it at
17 the Quaker Meeting House in Philadelphia because it was one of the only places that I felt like . .
18 .
- 19 AJ: Neutral enough?
- 20 BS: It wasn't just neutral. I felt like the Quakers actually accepted us despite the fact that they
21 probably didn't have a lot of education, but just their very . . . spiritual practices and politics.
22 The Quakers were . . . they had a big multi-service building so they had other organizations in
23 that building. They had a youth organization called Bridges Project, which is kind of where I
24 grabbed the word bridges for this . . .
- 25 AJ: So, it was called Bridges . . .
- 26 BS: Bridges to Coalition: A Community Forum on Transgender Issues.
- 27 AJ: OK.
- 28 BS: It was simply . . . first of all, it was great because it was in the meeting space, so it's where they
29 went to worship. So, it was all of these different . . . I hate to say pews because that sounds very
30 church-like, but the long benches that people would sit at, but they were also kind of facing
31 each other in a way . . . they're facing front, but they're also facing each other.
- 32 AJ: Facing each other, yeah.
- 33 BS: So, there was a kind of sense of collective community there that wouldn't have been if people
34 were sitting in rows and chairs and facing forward. And then, people basically just got up . . . I
35 remember this young trans kid who was African American trans-male identified and . . . I don't
36 know what age he was, but I think he was like 17. Really struggling and he got up and read from
37 his autobiography, he was writing an autobiography, and that's how we started the whole thing
38 off. And then, people basically just chose topics and got up and just . . . it was no prepared
39 speeches – at a time before I think . . . a lot of it was very first person personal experience at a

- 1 time before we had a collective sense of politics, or that's the way to talk about that – which is
2 effective.
- 3 AJ: Yes.
- 4 BS: I was trying to tell Dean Spade this at one point. Dean is a trans-academic now, but at the time
5 was running the Sylvia Rivera Law . . . what became the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. I was like,
6 “Dean, I remember the day before we had a collective political analysis of things – where we
7 were still struggling for words.” So, people were very much speaking from their personal
8 experiences – whether it was an experience of violence, experience of employment
9 discrimination, experience of all these different things. And, it was super powerful. That
10 became the catalyst for various political actions after that, including the fact that a week later,
11 our community center – the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, had recently just added
12 Bisexual and Transgender to the name, and also gathered some corporate sponsorship for the
13 first time, so they actually had money. So, they went from this really run-down little building
14 called Penguin Place to what was called William Way, they had to name it after a white gay man.
15 William Way LGBT Community Center.
- 16 AJ: William White?
- 17 BS: William Way.
- 18 AJ: Way – I thought you said Way.
- 19 BS: They call it Gay Way now but . . . I'm just like, whatever. So, William Way, he was apparently a
20 very prominent gay white businessman in the community, he gave a lot of money after he died.
21 So, they got all this money, brand new building, nice space, big. Tacked on the B and the T to
22 the name – a week later the board voted to take the B and the T out because they felt like they
23 couldn't . . . we assumed, I think – and we heard some rumors, that they thought it was going to
24 dissuade some corporate sponsors if bisexual and transgender were in the name.
- 25 AJ: Sure.
- 26 BS: So, I called everyone on our Bridges organizing list and I said, “We need to go to this board
27 meeting and yell at them.” And, that's what we did. So, in that meeting – it was very
28 transformational because the board was sitting there, one gay white male lawyer said incredibly
29 insulting things to us, like, “Start your own damn organization then.” And there was . . . I'm
30 saying people's races and genders because I think that it matters. There was a non-trans Black
31 lesbian who started crying and saying, “This is just wrong.” She didn't have an analysis of why it
32 was wrong, she just felt deeply, in her body and soul, that it was wrong – and she was right. And
33 then, there was this incredibly . . . I had very mixed relationships with this person, Walter Leer,
34 he was even in his 70s at the time, I think he lived to be 90, he lived to be very old, he was a very
35 longtime social justice activist who had done a lot with the American . . . APA? What is the
36 organization for physicians? He was a doctor, and for years he was advocating to remove
37 homosexual . . .
- 38 AJ: AMA – the American Medical . . .

- 1 BS: Yeah, because APA is the Psychological Association. But, he was also working with the APA
2 because what he was trying to do, and eventually helped accomplish, was to remove
3 homosexuality as a diagnostic category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental
4 diseases. So, he was part of that political effort. He was also accruing this amazing social justice
5 health archive in his house, because when I went over to visit his house, it was just full of boxes
6 and boxes and boxes – most of it was on reproductive justice, not on HIV because he felt like
7 HIV was being documented well elsewhere. So, it was reproductive justice and I can't
8 remember the other area that he collected, and he ended up donating this to the University of
9 Pennsylvania. The point is, he interrupted the entire meeting and he said to the white lawyer,
10 "You know as well as I do that that's completely disingenuous because it's extremely hard to
11 start an organization without money." He looked at me, because I was the one who was kind of
12 speaking vociferously for the group, and he said, "Talk to me afterward." I was like, "OK." He
13 said, "I know a grant you can apply for, I want to help you apply for this grant." And that's how
14 this whole thing got started where we started this thing called the Transgender Health Action
15 Coalition, or THAC.
- 16 AJ: THAC.
- 17 BS: THAC, which I don't know why we came up with that acronym, but everything was an acronym
18 back then, which was a peer-based . . . everybody was either trans or trans partner or ally of
19 some sort. We came up with this peer-based organization and we had great ambitions of doing
20 all this work, but honestly the degree to which trans folks couldn't make it to meetings because
21 our lives were just in chaos and/or completely destabilized made it really hard to get anything
22 done.
- 23 AJ: Philly seems like the land of coalitions to me.
- 24 BS: OK, so, you know, it looks good now, but it's kind of like the Wizard of Oz, it looked a lot better
25 than it really was for a while. And then, because it started looking better – because ultimately
26 this all culminates in the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference. I was actually on the first
27 committee because I crashed it. Once again, it was started by a trans woman – actually, a Black
28 trans woman, Charlene Arcila, and she . . .
- 29 AJ: How do you spell her name?
- 30 BS: I can't . . . her last name, you can look it up online, I can't spell it correctly.
- 31 AJ: OK, I'll look it up. I just want to acknowledge her.
- 32 BS: No, I think she should be acknowledged. I'm trying to mention a lot of people who I don't think
33 otherwise would be mentioned historically.
- 34 AJ: Dean Spade, Leslie Feinberg, Lou Sullivan. I'm pretty sure they're going to be mentioned.
- 35 BS: They're out there, they're out there.
- 36 AJ: I've met them all – yeah.

- 1 BS: So, Charlene started this while working for one of the most politically corrupt funding arms – it
2 was called the TPAC. I can't remember what it stands for but it was the treatment side . . . they
3 kept getting money for the treatment side of HIV from the federal government. They were
4 known for spending money on things they shouldn't be and squandering it and embezzling and
5 doing all kinds of really shady things. But that doesn't matter, she was an executive assistant
6 who worked for the director of that funding arm in the city. She wanted to have this
7 conference. They put a little bit of money towards it. The point is, about 10 years in, we were
8 still trying to organize it as a group of trans folks and as a collective without having an
9 organization like the Mizsoni Center take it over – that became a political rift in the group. The
10 conference became extremely successful and it drew thousands and thousands of people to the
11 city, and for one week, every year in Philadelphia, it just would be like trans mecca – better than
12 San Francisco because larger. I remember West Philly was the housing unit of the conference
13 because we did the community housing thing back then, before people were paying for really
14 expensive hotel rooms, and we made sure everybody could have a place to stay in community
15 housing and West Philly was the place where the most trans folks who were visible lived, and
16 political lived. And so, I remember walking down the street with somebody who was visiting
17 during the conference, and they said, "This is amazing, I'm going to move here." I said,
18 "Understand, this is one week out of the year." But, the fact is that because people had that
19 experience, they started moving there and it became that. It was not that, and then people
20 thought it was that, so then it became that because they showed up.
- 21 AJ: And then they came – right.
- 22 BS: And, because Brooklyn became completely gentrified and unaffordable and other places on the
23 east coast were not all that great still to live in. There weren't that many trans folks in
24 Baltimore, by comparison – although there were, but Philly became the place, I guess, for a
25 while.
- 26 AJ: Wow. Talk to me about relationships.
- 27 BS: I don't have a lot to say.
- 28 AJ: Are you in a relationship right now?
- 29 BS: No.
- 30 AJ: Have you been in a relationship?
- 31 BS: I've been in several.
- 32 AJ: Who do you date? Men? Women? Trans-identified? Butches?
- 33 BS: It's changed. I remember being asked that question at a conference one time because I guess
34 there was this non-trans gay guy who was interested in me and he was like, "Ask him if he dates
35 men or women." I said to the person asking on his behalf, "Can I have another choice?"
- 36 AJ: Right.

- 1 BS: Please? So, my dating orientation, I don't actually identify with a sexual orientation because I
2 feel like most sexuality categories are based on a gender binary. It doesn't work for me. The
3 other reason it doesn't work for me, some of my Macalester students are kind of schooling me
4 in what I would consider newer concepts, although I think people have always felt this way – like
5 students who identify today as asexual, right? But, I'm thinking, "That's not a sexuality," and for
6 them it was.
- 7 AJ: Right.
- 8 BS: It was a whole new learning for me when I was like, "Oh, this is actually a thing," and there's a
9 spectrum and I didn't know that. I was like, "I could be on this spectrum, sure." A-romantic
10 versus asexual, there's all kinds of ways of parsing it out further. The thing that I used to say
11 about sexuality . . . because who I've been attracted to has changed.
- 12 AJ: Yes.
- 13 BS: The thing I used to say about my sexuality, now I just don't talk about it because I've been
14 chronically ill and sexuality is not at the top of my list – when you don't have energy to relate to
15 people, it doesn't matter what level we're talking about.
- 16 AJ: Got it.
- 17 BS: So, I used to say I was transsexual, in the more literal sense in that my sexuality is understood
18 through a trans lens. So, I can't tell you gay, straight, bi because all those things depend, to me,
19 on a gender binary.
- 20 AJ: Right.
- 21 BS: Right?
- 22 AJ: That's true.
- 23 BS: Straight, same sex, opposite sex, both sex, but for me I was like, "None of the above." I went
24 from being in relationships . . . and I don't want to discount any of these by saying that was a
25 phase, so when I was female-body presenting as masculine, I was dating femmes. The one thing
26 that I can say is a constant is, for me, attraction is all about a play between a similarity, it starts
27 with a similarity, and then there's a difference. I don't have a name for that. But, that similarity
28 and that difference changed as my body and my identity changed. So, first I was dating
29 feminine, non-trans . . . because I just didn't know any trans women . . . non-trans women. Then
30 I started on testosterone and I was transitioning physically, I dated a butch woman who ended
31 up getting married to a guy and having babies. But, at the time, I was with a more masculine
32 partner – that was kind of the first time. And then, more recently, and this is probably the last
33 relationship I'll talk about, more challenging was both a . . . I was dating a person who was just
34 beginning . . . a trans masculine person who was just beginning to transition physically. So, for a
35 year I was like, "No way." Because, you know, the first year of hormones is like puberty all over
36 and I'm like, "I'm not doing that. I'm not going through that with anybody." We just were
37 friends, right, but it became something that was kind of undeniable that it was more than
38 friends. But, I never saw myself as gay – I still don't. I also don't see myself . . . I definitely don't

- 1 see myself as straight. I can't name it. As the person transitioned, I actually even felt like I was
2 having partner issues but I didn't get to go to the partner support groups because I couldn't . . . I
3 was trans. I was like, "Why can't a trans person have partner . . .?" You know, as this other
4 person that you're attracted to, as their body changes, as their identity in the world changes, as
5 your relationship changes, as you relate to each other, why am I not allowed to have these
6 feelings? Or these issues and struggles as my relationship to this person is also transitioning?
7 So, the most recent . . . it was also an intergenerational relationship, it was really challenging –
8 the person was 17 years younger than me.
- 9 AJ: Oh, wow, that could have some impact.
- 10 BS: That can be OK if that person is relatively mature, but it can also be not OK. Also got called his
11 father a lot so it was kind of creepy and not OK. I didn't see it that way. I knew I was dealing
12 with an adult. I'm not actually attracted to children, but a lot of trans guys when we'd be in
13 transition, you may or may not know this, look a lot younger than we really are.
- 14 AJ: I do know that.
- 15 BS: I remember when I was 30 and I looked 18 and my students thought I was the same age as them
16 when I was a TA. So, this person looked very much younger than actually he was, so it was like I
17 was the pervert and that person was being exploited and it was really weird to have a
18 relationship.
- 19 AJ: That would make some challenges for a relationship, I would think too.
- 20 BS: Yeah, I haven't thought about sexuality in a while because I've just been dealing with health
21 issues and moving so often that I don't even get to know people.
- 22 AJ: Yeah, relationships kind of get tough. So, let me ask you this, Ben, I guess as a last question . . .
23 maybe not an absolute last question, but what do you think the agenda for the trans community
24 should be going forward?
- 25 BS: That word agenda . . . it's problematic from the whole gay agenda, conservative . . . no, I'm just
26 thinking about it.
- 27 AJ: Speak on it.
- 28 BS: I don't think it's singular, so I don't think there is a law. I know there's a lot of work on formal
29 political representational politics going on – I mean, you just got elected to the city council,
30 right?
- 31 AJ: Yes, I did.
- 32 BS: Which is important. I think, though, that what's going on in the movement building world
33 where, perhaps for the first time, from a trans-political perspective, we're seeing intersectional
34 politics start to arise and we're seeing . . . you talked about coalitions in Philly, I mean I was
35 thinking about that driving over here. I was like, is it really coalition? Is it really separate groups
36 working on their single issues coming together around a single cause, one particular thing they
37 want to solve?

- 1 AJ: Right, which is the truest definition.
- 2 BS: Or, is it intersectional politics where every single group, maybe they do call themselves Black
3 Lives Matter or maybe they do call . . . but, they're also centering everything at the same time so
4 there's a more holistic approach to politics, right?
- 5 AJ: Yeah.
- 6 BS: So, queer Black woman are founding organizations called Black Lives Matter versus the typical . .
7 .
- 8 AJ: Right.
- 9 BS: And, people are not just seeing matters of race of economic justice or gender justice or anything
10 as separable from each other, but as interconnected, right.
- 11 AJ: As interconnected - yes.
- 12 BS: So, I'm really hopeful when I hear students, the millennials, for whom gender is not even an
13 issue. In fact, they're farther along than a whole lot of us when it comes to whatever . . . it's like
14 it's OK, it's part of their world actually. It's not just that it's OK somewhere else – like the
15 politics of tolerance, it's part of their world. Gender non-conformity is a part of their world and I
16 think, to varying degrees because I'm just thinking about the Macalester students I recently
17 encountered, they're already seeing the world intersectionally. I'm putting on rose-colored
18 glasses right now because I also taught in Kansas two years ago and I saw the opposite. I saw a
19 whole lot of white supremacy, not so much classism though because a lot of those students
20 there were from either working class or military backgrounds because the town had a military
21 base in it, so a lot of students were there on the military's educational program. But, there were
22 also some very privileged white students in the classroom who just kind of separated
23 themselves from all the rest. So, I see parts of the country where this kind of politics, mostly
24 urban areas, are starting to happen and then I see parts of the country that, just as we saw in
25 the last election, it's very split.
- 26 AJ: Yeah.
- 27 BS: They were just setting up camps around their particular form of privilege and saying, "I'm
28 defending this, I'm not thinking intersectionally." But, I challenged them. I was like, "You need
29 to start thinking differently." So, what is my . . . my hope is that the movement continues. My
30 hope is that we can include . . . because I'm thinking that . . . there is now groups and there is
31 now people that are on the radar, who have been very marginalized. But, I think we always
32 have the challenge of becoming more intersectional about our thinking. I think people with
33 disabilities, I think trans folks who are getting older are becoming increasingly marginalized from
34 political activities and movements and even considered for jobs, for that matter.
- 35 AJ: Yeah.
- 36 BS: I think that we need to start thinking about what the future is going to look like given that who
37 we are is going to change as time passes.

- 1 AJ: Yes.
- 2 BS: More of us are going to become disabled, more of us are becoming older, more of us do not
3 have the support systems because we didn't have family or we don't have partners. I also . . . I
4 just want to say something, the emergence of the censoring of Black trans women's lives,
5 because I got asked this question at that forum that you were on the panel, my research is
6 talking about that and somebody said, "Aren't we running the risk of fetishizing or reifying Black
7 trans women?" And I'm like well yes and no. If it's just something people say, that's a problem.
8 But, if they really are censoring the voices of Black trans women and their organizations, then
9 they're doing something right. At the same time, I hear anybody pretty much who is trans
10 masculine, assigned female at birth, but also including Black trans men, get kind of erased in
11 these equations, right? I wonder, because there is so much that we have in common with those
12 who get classified as women in general. For example, extremely common to hear trans men talk
13 about having sexual abuse or being sexually violated in some way. Why? Because we were
14 classified and targeted as female-bodied people. We have this experience, but it gets entirely
15 erased when we're immobilized in the category of women – which is inclusive of trans women
16 now, but it's not inclusive of people who were having these experiences. So, I think we need to
17 start talking, and this is for the future, a little bit beyond identity and a little bit more to what do
18 we share in common in terms of our experiences of oppression and/or inequity in the world,
19 and where can we connect around that.
- 20 AJ: So, broadening ideas, broadening definitions.
- 21 BS: Trans men can get pregnant, right?
- 22 AJ: Right.
- 23 BS: Broadening . . . I see it happening around here and I'm really heartened because I've seen trans
24 guys who are pregnant in other parts of the country and people can't conceptualize of a
25 pregnant man. I'm like, "But it's possible." So, we need to start changing our language – it's not
26 just women . . .
- 27 AJ: People with uteruses.
- 28 BS: Exactly. So, I want to talk to medical professionals about let's be more descriptive about what
29 we're talking about and less gendered. We don't need to gender body parts. And, we can
30 connect with each other. I said this in the talk and you were there, somebody said, "Did
31 something unusual come up about your research that had to do with embodiment?" I said,
32 "Well, there was that one moment when I was writing about Thomas Beatie," who was dubbed
33 the pregnant man, because he was the first to kind of become a media viral sensation. There
34 were more pregnant guys before him but the fact is that Beatie made himself publicly visible to
35 the point that he was a target for a lot of transphobic verbal violence, I'll say. They did actually
36 have their home targeted and other things happen, but a lot of it was in the media. But, some
37 of the more unusual responses I saw were from women-identified, female-bodied people, who
38 were pregnant who said, "I identify with you because I'm also in my third trimester, and I can
39 relate." So, I don't have your gender identity and I'm not male, but I can identify with you
40 because our states of embodiment, we have something in common. So, my point is, whether

1 it's experiential, or whether it's our state of embodiment, which are inexplicably connected, our
2 experience of the world is always through a body in some way. I think that we have to find ways
3 beyond identity politics to begin to make these connections even more broadly and deeply. I
4 think that otherwise people are going to continue to get left out. I don't know what's going to
5 happen. You mentioned Marcelle Cook-Daniels and Bear Goodrum in your talk just recently,
6 two people who I actually knew from back in the day who both died from suicide. I just can't
7 fathom a world where there isn't support for Black trans masculine people just because we're
8 censoring trans women's voices in movements but forgetting the fact that, in some way, we
9 have fundamental things in common that transcend these identity categories. Does that make
10 sense?

11 AJ: Absolutely.

12 BS: Otherwise, you're going to continue to be dropping people and losing people and I just . . . yeah,
13 that's what I would hope. I hope we can get to a point where so many of us feel validated in our
14 identities that that's not the point of fragility that we need to rally around, that we can, in fact,
15 connect with each other more experientially – and around these systems of power that affect us
16 all. They affect us differentially, but they do affect us all. I even think about my . . . I've spoken
17 about my father's own fragile . . . we talk a lot about toxic masculinity, the reason why my father
18 . . . I think my father was an abuser, and targeted the most masculine member of the family,
19 because my sisters were like Barbie dolls, by comparison. In my family, it was just gender binary
20 – either hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine. I know I talked about the overall affect, but there
21 was also the gender expression thing. I think his masculinity was not only toxic, it was fragile.
22 This is a real stretch, but if this movement and if the future of gender is going to mean anything
23 at all, it has to address that because otherwise I think the violences that are perpetuated by
24 people who seem to be expressing toxic masculinity are just going to continue because what's
25 underneath that is just a profound fragility.

26 AJ: Fragility – wow.

27 BS: And, I think you could probably relate to that because you were assigned male at birth. I don't
28 have that experience of having that early assignment where you know full well that . . . I mean,
29 you're also Black so that makes a difference, but you are assigned male at birth. I've talked to
30 white trans women about this, for example, and they're like, "I never really experienced . . . I
31 tried to be macho and I tried to occupy that category in a way that felt solid and defending
32 against the world," but it never felt that way to them. There was always somebody attacking
33 them for not being masculine enough or not being this or that. So, we knew it was kind of an
34 illusion. People prop it up quite well with their behaviors and their actions, and even their
35 privilege. But, it's kind of an illusion. I'm not saying we have a lot of sympathy for them, but I
36 am saying that without addressing folks who are also perpetuating the violence, there really is
37 no . . .

38 AJ: Well, you never really end it then.

39 BS: Yeah, exactly. So, there really is no good outcome for a different world in the future. A
40 different world is pretty much . . . I think it's already happening. The fact that I'm disoriented
41 and don't always understand is an indication of that . . . once it's beyond my ability to fully

1 comprehend, particularly when it's some of these younger folks, I'm like, yeah – the different
2 world is already coming into existence. I just don't really know where I'm at in it.

3 AJ: Right. Wow, well this has been a fascinating discussion, Ben Singer.

4 BS: Thank you.

5 AJ: Thank you, so very, very much for sharing your personal self but also your intellectual and
6 philosophical self as well. Much gratitude, my friend.

7 BS: I have affection and gratitude towards you too.

8 AJ: Until we meet again. Bye-bye.