

Rebecca Kling  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

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

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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   Rebecca Kling           -RK  
3

4   AJ:     So, my name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History  
5           Project at the University of Minnesota, archives and special collections. Today is January 25,  
6           2016. I'm in Chicago, Illinois, and I am speaking with Rebecca Kling. So, Rebecca, why don't you  
7           introduce yourself, spell your name – some Rebecca's go with one "c", some go with a "k", all of  
8           those things. So spell your name for our transcriber, tell me your preferred gender pronouns,  
9           your current gender identity today, and your gender assigned at birth.

10   RK:    Rebecca Kling . . . I'm going to start that sentence over so it's a complete sentence. I am  
11           Rebecca Kling, R-e-b-e-c-c-a, K-l-i-n-g. I use she/her/hers pronouns. I identify as a woman,  
12           sometimes as a trans woman. I identify as trans, sometimes that's a part of my gender identity,  
13           sometimes it's not. I am from Chicago, Illinois.

14   AJ:    Wonderful. And your gender assigned at birth?

15   RK:    Oh, I'm sorry, I was assigned male at birth.

16   AJ:    Tell me about this whole . . . you know what? We're going to talk about that in a little bit. I  
17           want to start us out with just you thinking about what's the earliest thing you remember in life?

18   RK:    The earliest memory I have is probably of the room I had . . . so my family moved all within  
19           Evanston, that's the first city north of Chicago.

20   AJ:    Right on the lakeshore.

21   RK:    Yeah, so we moved a couple of times but it was all within Evanston. So until I was six or seven,  
22           we lived in South Evanston, and I would say my first memory is probably of the room I had that  
23           overlooked the back yard and I can remember sort of where my bed was and where I was in the  
24           hallway down, with my parent's bedroom on the other end and my brother's bed along the way  
25           – not even a specific event or anything, but just sort of that space feels very deep and old in my  
26           memories.

27   AJ:    About how old would you say you were?

28   RK:    Maybe three or four.

29   AJ:    Good. So you went to elementary school in Evanston?

30   RK:    I went to King Lab, which was Martin Luther King, Jr. Experimental Laboratory School, everyone  
31           called it King Lab. I went their K-5 and part of the reason my parents had moved to Evanston  
32           was they were . . . and I've talked with them about this, I'm not putting words in their mouth,  
33           but they were doing what they felt like good, liberal families do – they were moving to a diverse  
34           city with a diverse school district and liberal politics. And so, King Lab was a magnet school, so  
35           people from all over the district were there.

36   AJ:    Did it have anything to do with Northwestern University?

- 1 RK: I don't think so, at least I don't remember that. I bet there were Northwestern students there  
2 as teaching assistants and that sort of thing, but I don't remember any specific relationship with  
3 Northwestern.
- 4 AJ: I only ask because the University of Chicago also has a lab school.
- 5 RK: Right, they have their lab school. No, this is an Evanston public school. Unfortunately, at the  
6 time I was there, Evanston School District was starting to do some of the consolidating that a lot  
7 of school districts have had to do and so it wasn't . . . the classroom sizes were growing a little  
8 bit from its heyday and the organization of the school wasn't quite as cohesive and feeling as  
9 politically active in terms of wanting to be a better space for all sorts of students. And it was still  
10 a good school, but it wasn't what my parents had hoped for. I honestly can't comment on how  
11 it is these days, this was 20-25 years ago. And so, I was having experiences with being bullied  
12 and being picked on, I wasn't out at that time – I certainly didn't have language to talk about  
13 being trans, but kids are really good at sensing differences. I was a smart kid, I was in the  
14 advanced classes, and that also doesn't usually win a lot of popularity. I was having a lot of  
15 bullying issues in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade and my parents decided to . . . with talking with me and my  
16 input, and decided to move me to North Shore Country Day School, which is a private school on  
17 the North Shore. I was in North Shore Country Day School for 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and then  
18 went back to Evanston Township High School, which is the Evanston public school for high  
19 school. So I was in public school K-5 and then had a gap for middle school and then went back  
20 for high school.
- 21 AJ: Did the bullying subside at North Shore?
- 22 RK: It was definitely . . . I was not one of the cool, popular kids, but it was a much, much smaller  
23 class, it was a full class size – all of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, all of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, all of 8<sup>th</sup> grade were maybe 30-35  
24 people. So it was a much smaller class size and they were . . . because it was a private school,  
25 able to be more intentional about the students they let in – which, the flip side of that is it was  
26 predominantly, although those exclusively, white, certainly very wealthy students and families.  
27 And so, I'm conflicted. On the one hand, I believe in public schools, I believe in the idea of public  
28 schools, I believe in funding public schools. I think that was the right decision for me at the  
29 time, but I . . . and the bullying did definitely go down, there was much more active supervision  
30 of students and so there sort of couldn't be the type of bullying and threatening to get beat up  
31 and that sort of thing that I was having at King Lab. On the other hand, both of my parents are  
32 also fans of public schools – my mom taught for many years in a public school and so that was a  
33 hard decision for them to feel like they were doing, what I do think was the right thing for me,  
34 for their child, but a little bit at the expense of their politics.
- 35 AJ: Wow, we have to make sacrifices sometimes in life and even sometimes around our own values  
36 around things. Did you have siblings?
- 37 RK: I have an older brother. I have an older brother who is about two and a half years older than me  
38 and he went to King Lab, K-12, and then also went to Evanston Township High School, so he was  
39 a senior there while I was a freshman.

- 1 AJ: Hmm. So, when was the first time you recognized you there was sort of a difference in the  
2 way you were assigned at birth and the way you felt like being in the world?
- 3 RK: So the language I've come up with is that I always knew boy was wrong for me, but it took me a  
4 lot longer to figure out what would be right for me. The analogy that I use is that we all have  
5 the experience of tossing and turning at night trying to get to sleep and we know we're  
6 uncomfortable but we aren't sure how to get comfortable and fall asleep. And that's sort of  
7 what boy felt like for me. I knew it was uncomfortable but I wasn't sure how to position myself  
8 or what might be right to be comfortable. Part of that was I didn't have language. I think labels  
9 are a double-edged sword but I do think there's something incredibly powerful about finding a  
10 word that describes you and feel like, "Oh, this is me and this is how I make sense of myself in  
11 the world." And growing up at the very beginnings of the internet and certainly before anything  
12 like Laverne Cox or Janet Mock or *Transparent* or *Orange is the New Black* or *The Danish Girl*.
- 13 AJ: All very recent developments, I'm just going to throw out there.
- 14 RK: Yeah, I could do a laundry list. Growing up before all of that, I didn't have an idea that trans was  
15 a thing and as I started to get an idea as a late adolescent, early teen . . . 11, 12, 13, when I  
16 started to get online, on aol at the time – so this would have been like 1993, 1994, 1995. The  
17 way that trans identity was talked about was very black or white – either you hated your body  
18 and hated your genitalia and knew who you really were and knew what you wanted and knew  
19 you wanted surgery and knew you were ready to leave your friends and family behind to get it,  
20 or you didn't. And there was no middle ground. And as an 11, 12 or 13-year-old who had  
21 parents who were explicitly liberal and who were in this liberal community, it didn't feel like . . .  
22 the people online saying, "To be trans is to give up all of your life," that didn't ring true with me,  
23 but I didn't know enough to say, "No, no, no – it doesn't actually have to be that way." And  
24 similarly, as a teenager who was discovering that masturbation is pretty fun, the things that I  
25 was reading online that said to be trans you have to hate your genitalia and you have to hate  
26 your body . . . there were things I hated about my genitalia and about my body, but it wasn't this  
27 sort of vitriolic sense of . . . the language we would use now is dysphoria.
- 28 AJ: Yes.
- 29 RK: I felt that, but not in the way these people online were talking about it. And the other thing is,  
30 the voices online due to privilege and due to access to technology, were primarily older white  
31 trans folk, mostly trans women. And their stories are important and their stories are valid and  
32 their stories are true, but they weren't my story. And so to read things online about their stories  
33 and that being the only idea of trans experience, didn't totally make sense to me. And that, I  
34 think, in retrospect, shouldn't have made sense to me because my experience as a 10-year-old  
35 growing up on the north side of Chicago in the 1990s is very, very different than someone who is  
36 growing up in the 1950s or 1960s or 1970s.
- 37 AJ: Right. Wow.
- 38 RK: That was a long answer. As a performer and as a storyteller, those are the only kind of answers I  
39 give. If you need me to keep things shorter, please feel free to . . .

- 1 AJ: No, that's fine – expand and say what you need to say. So from that sort of long-winded  
2 answer, which is beautiful, I think you expressed some things that I certainly haven't heard  
3 expressed in this project that I've been working on. So there was no specific time or moment  
4 that you said, "Hey, I am not this, I am this."
- 5 RK: I don't remember a light switch going off or a snap of, "Oh, that's what it is." And part of that,  
6 I'm an over thinker, and I know that about myself, and so because online I was finding these sort  
7 of checklists – so to be really trans you have to fit all those things, and I didn't fit all those things.  
8 It took me until my early 20s to finally work with a therapist and work with friends and worth  
9 with the community to say, "No, no, no, no, no – it's not a checklist, you can figure it out – it's a  
10 pick or choose." So I started using language of, "I think I might be trans," as early as 15 or 16,  
11 but it wasn't until my early 20s that I said, "No, I actually want to try hormones, I want to try  
12 transitioning," because the narrative I was reading, what I was being told . . . and the narrative I  
13 sort of constructed for myself was, "If you transition, you'll end up . . ." or, "If I transition, I'll end  
14 up ugly, I'll end up masculine, I'll end up unloved, I'll end up unlovable, my parents won't like me  
15 or love me anymore, my friends won't like me anymore, I'll be unemployable." And that was all  
16 terrifying as a . . . you know, owning my privilege as a privileged white male presenting person,  
17 who didn't necessarily want to lose all of those things.
- 18 AJ: Yeah.
- 19 RK: And so it took a while before I was able to figure out, "OK, that narrative being sold was coming  
20 from a place of truth, but wasn't my truth."
- 21 AJ: Awesome. Did you sort of go through an array of terminology or language to sort of describe  
22 who you felt you were?
- 23 RK: The language I used for a long time was, "I think I want to be a girl," because the baggage  
24 associated with trans and transgender and transsexual didn't feel right yet. And, as an over  
25 thinker, I was really scared of saying, "I want to be a girl." That felt very definitive and solid and  
26 like I knew what I wanted. I knew if a genie came or if I had a magic spell, that I would change  
27 my body and be a "real" girl, but that the path that it felt like was laid out for me didn't feel  
28 realistic or like something I was ready for. So the language I used for a long time was, "I think I  
29 want to be a girl." And then for a while I said, "I think I might be trans or transgender," and it  
30 wasn't until my late teens or early 20s that I was able to say, "No, this is the word that's right for  
31 me. I'm still not sure what to do about it, but this is the word that's right for me."
- 32 AJ: So you never tried on sexual orientation sort of identity?
- 33 RK: No.
- 34 AJ: Like, "I'm gay."
- 35 RK: I was always certain enough and confident enough that my attraction lies mostly with women or  
36 femme-presenting folks. I think part of that, for me, was . . . because since I've transitioned I've  
37 had sexual experiences with men and really had a lot of fun.
- 38 AJ: Yay!

- 1 RK: At the time, it felt like part of . . . being with what felt like at the time, another man – another  
2 male-bodied person, felt like it would be re-enforcing me as male because it would be this gay  
3 experience, and that didn't feel right or good and so I didn't really ever explore sexual language  
4 that I know some other trans folks do.
- 5 AJ: OK, wow. What have been some of the more positive aspects of expressing your true gender  
6 identity?
- 7 RK: I think the most positive is feeling more settled in my body. I get, as a storyteller – as a  
8 performer, I get frustrated with some of the clichés around trans identity – that transitioning  
9 makes us feel more at home in our bodies, it makes us feel more complete, it makes us feel  
10 more whole. I've thought a lot about the language of transitioning and the metaphors we use,  
11 and to some extent I feel like we use those because the experience is sort of indescribable – or  
12 at least for me, it's sort of indescribable, of feeling more like my body belongs to me. And so, at  
13 its core, the best thing about transitioning and about expressing a more authentic gendered  
14 experience and identity, is being able to look in the mirror and like more about what I see, or  
15 being able to be in the shower and like my body more, or being sexual with partners and liking  
16 that more or standing in front of a group of people – friends, family, total strangers, and feeling  
17 more seen as who I feel I am. Specifics, I definitely think the activist and political network that  
18 I've become connected with, I'm incredibly grateful for and that the work that I've been able to  
19 do as an artist and as educator and as an activist, I feel grateful for. I would like to think that I  
20 would still be involved in some of that if I had not been trans, but I don't think I would have  
21 been involved to the extent that I am because it's part of who I am.
- 22 AJ: Sure.
- 23 RK: And then I would also say the way that my coming out has impacted, fortunately positively, the  
24 relationships in my life. It certainly took time for my parents to get onboard with me being trans  
25 or with me transitioning, but we now have incredibly strong relationships. It took some time for  
26 friends from high school and college to sort of understand what that meant, but I'm still very  
27 close with a lot of my friends from high school and college. I know that's relatively rare in the  
28 trans community and I feel very grateful and lucky. In part, I do think that's a reflection of sort  
29 of where and when I grew up.
- 30 AJ: Yeah, the generation, the geography.
- 31 RK: Absolutely.
- 32 AJ: All of those things. Where did you go to college?
- 33 RK: To Northwestern, so I stuck around. I, in part, still wasn't totally sure what I wanted to be doing.  
34 I was interested in theatre but wasn't calling myself a performer or an actor because I was  
35 getting cast as male roles when I was. I wasn't totally ready to leave home. I lived on campus,  
36 so I wasn't still at my parent's houses – my parents split up when I was in high school, but it was  
37 close enough to feel familiar. I've actually lived in or around Chicago my whole life.
- 38 AJ: Wow, that's great. What have been some of the challenges that you've encountered since  
39 expressing your truer gender identity?

- 1 RK: The fundamental challenge is figuring it out. As I said, the language for me wasn't there and the  
2 role models weren't there. I feel very strongly that part of the way we find ourselves is through  
3 story, that we see stories where we are reflected, we see stories where we aren't reflected, we  
4 put ourselves in stories. My roommates have a 6-year-old, and he loves telling stories and  
5 hearing stories and placing himself in stories. That's a human thing, and so not having that felt  
6 very isolating and very alienating – to not be able to . . . and this is part of what's so important  
7 about some of the stuff coming out these days, to not be able to look at a bookshelf or open a  
8 magazine or look on TV and see someone who is like you. And this is something that people  
9 doing diversity work have known for decades. This is not a new thing that trans people have  
10 suddenly discovered.
- 11 AJ: Right, no. Yeah, Black people have been talking about this . . .
- 12 RK: This is not a magical new problem.
- 13 AJ: Right.
- 14 RK: I think beyond that, the hardships of navigating the world as trans and, on the whole, I have  
15 been incredibly, incredibly lucky. My parents never threatened to kick me out, they never cut  
16 me off financially, they never uninvited me from holiday events. I've always been stably housed  
17 and stably employed. As a trans person, I am really fucking lucky. At the same time, I've  
18 experienced the slurs and sort of street harassment that all trans people I know have. I was  
19 fired from a teaching job in 2010 for being trans, which in the state of Illinois is illegal, but again  
20 as people who have been fired for bullshit reasons can tell you, if you do something over the  
21 phone and then later change why it was done, it's real easy to get away with stuff like that.
- 22 AJ: Sure, yeah.
- 23 RK: And then I would say . . .
- 24 AJ: Did you pursue a legal remedy to that?
- 25 RK: Absolutely. I went to some employment lawyers in Chicago, I went to the EEOC, the Equal  
26 Employment Opportunity Commission, I went to the Illinois state and federal departments of  
27 education, and a number of them said, "We want to do work around this, we are ready as  
28 organizations to do work; however, when we reached out to the school, they said it was for a  
29 different reason." So the reason I was told is that I was bringing . . . my presence in the  
30 classroom was bringing up uncomfortable conversation and that students were asking about my  
31 deep voice and big hands – and they're not huge.
- 32 AJ: Yeah, not at all.
- 33 RK: But when, I think the EEOC was the one who tried to pursue it, when they called the school, the  
34 school said, "Oh, it just wasn't the right fit." And because it was all over the phone, the EEOC  
35 said to me, "We are not saying that you weren't discriminated against. We're saying we don't  
36 have the evidence to pursue a claim." So absolutely, I did try.
- 37 AJ: Which is heartbreaking.



- 1 RK: Yeah, it was . . . I think the first time in my life that I had had someone explicitly say to me, “You  
2 are not good enough for this because you are trans,” which feels very different than abstract  
3 politicians who say horrible things or religious leaders who say horrible things or people on  
4 Twitter or Facebook or websites or the news, because there’s something removed from that –  
5 they’re talking about trans people in general being icky, and even street harassment they’re  
6 talking about in general. They’re not saying, “We got to know you, we watched you teach a  
7 class, and we don’t want you to teach it.” What I try to take from that is, again – if that’s the  
8 worst thing that’s happened to me as a trans person, I can still count myself incredibly lucky.  
9 And so I try to take from that fuel to motivate and anger myself politically to push for more  
10 protection and more rights and more safety and all of the other things that we know the trans  
11 community needs – and other communities need. I think that that’s one of the things that I’ve  
12 tried to take as well – of, this was a new experience for me, this is not a new experience for lots  
13 and lots and lots of people both in the trans community and people who are people of color or  
14 who are women or who are disabled, or any of the long, long laundry list. And so, I’ve tried . . .  
15 but it took me a long time, it took me almost a year, to sort of emotionally move from the pain  
16 of that to fueling me to do the work.
- 17 AJ: So, I happen to know that . . . one of the reasons for us meeting today is because you are on the  
18 host committee for the NGTL Creating Change Conference 2016.
- 19 RK: It’s a long name – yes.
- 20 AJ: What was that experience like? Share some of the highlights of, I would suspect, a year or close  
21 to a year of planning that you guys did to put together this great conference.
- 22 RK: So the way Creating Change works . . .
- 23 AJ: And how does that play into your activism?
- 24 RK: Absolutely. The way that Creating Change works is that it’s in a new city every year – it’s in a  
25 different city every year, and that they work with a volunteer host committee in that city to help  
26 lay some groundwork. And so the host committee is asked to help solicit workshop proposals  
27 from local people, so to make sure that when they’re in the city that that city is represented, or  
28 that area – that part of the country; to help fundraise from local businesses and organizations;  
29 to attend local events and street fairs and festivals and stuff to flyer for Creating Change; and  
30 then the big thing that I was involved with was community housing.
- 31 AJ: OK.
- 32 RK: So people can apply through the – or could, it’s not closed and not yet open for next year, but  
33 could apply through the Creating Change website to say either, “I want to host someone who  
34 couldn’t otherwise afford to attend,” or, “I want to apply for housing,” for people who couldn’t  
35 otherwise attend.
- 36 AJ: “That’s the only way that I could attend.” Yeah.
- 37 RK: And that was the bulk of my involvement on the host committee. I was a little bit involved in  
38 some of the conversations with the trans hospitality suite, which was a suite at the hotel for

1 trans folks and gender non-conforming and intersex folks could go to hang out and have a safe  
2 space and food and conversation. I think the goals of the host committee are really wonderful.  
3 For the task force to acknowledge that we don't know your city, and the people who are there  
4 are going to do the best job of reaching out to individuals and reaching out to organizations and  
5 reaching out to the community and making sure that that part of the country is represented. It  
6 did feel sometimes . . . I was not one of the four co-chairs of the host committee who had the  
7 most contact with the festival . . . not the festival, with the task force and with Creating Change,  
8 so I can't speak for them. It felt like there were moments of the task force asking a lot of the  
9 host committee and not always providing the resources that I would have liked to see. I  
10 certainly don't think any of that was malicious or intentional, but I'm certainly hoping to have  
11 conversations with some of the task force staff to provide that feedback. I know they worked  
12 their butts off, I know . . . or I can only imagine, putting up a conference like this is a huge beast  
13 of an undertaking, but there were moments where it didn't feel like they fully grasped the work  
14 that the host committee was doing or how much work the volunteers were doing.

15 AJ: Wow.

16 RK: And maybe I'm wrong, maybe that's not true. I certainly think, again, that the task force staff  
17 works incredibly hard and I don't want to sound like I'm not appreciative of that work – I'm  
18 absolutely appreciative of that work. I do think those lines of communication could maybe be  
19 better and the way that the host committee is worked with could maybe be more actively  
20 supported.

21 AJ: So, this is your interview – not my interview, but I will say that they've been hosting this  
22 conference for over 25 years.

23 RK: Twenty-eight years.

24 AJ: Twenty-eight years. So I'm pretty sure they have a good sense of the level of commitment that  
25 it takes for a local community to help them put this conference together.

26 RK: That's true, that's legit. I appreciate that. And I think it's easy . . . one of the things, having  
27 nothing to do with the task force, but just was frustrating to see this week, as we're coming out  
28 of Creating Change, was, and we talked about this a little before we started the interview, sort  
29 of forgetting to assume good intent. And so, because I didn't see something doesn't mean it  
30 wasn't happening. And maybe there is a way for the host committee and the task force to have  
31 those lines of communication be better so that the feeling of that might be different even if the  
32 reality is the same – if that makes sense.

33 AJ: Sure, absolutely.

34 RK: Because I appreciate that reminder, that Creating Change has been going on almost as long as I  
35 have been alive and that I don't want to come in as someone who has only been working this  
36 past year and be like, "What are you doing? You don't know what you're talking about? I  
37 clearly know what I'm doing better than you."

38 AJ: No, and I'm just saying that in support of your . . . I think it's wonderful that you lead with good  
39 intent.

- 1 RK: I try to.
- 2 AJ: Exactly. And I don't think it's malicious at all, but I think they have a very solid awareness of  
3 what it takes to make this happen – and it's a lot.
- 4 RK: The specific thing that I'll say that was a hiccup, and that feedback I'm going to give, was there  
5 were moments, specifically with community housing, there were moments we asked for what  
6 people had done in the past – so who did you reach out to? How did those emails look? What  
7 was the structure? What was the timeline? And we didn't get a ton of information about that.  
8 So that's some . . . and that may be, again, it may just be that they didn't have that, that the past  
9 volunteers, tooting my own horn, weren't as organized as we were.
- 10 AJ: Yes, exactly.
- 11 RK: So one of the things I want to make sure I do, as part of that community housing, is give some of  
12 that information to say, "Next year in Philadelphia, here's what I think the housing folks should  
13 know. Here's the timeline that made sense, here are ways we reached out, here are the emails  
14 and what they looked like, here's how the spreadsheet worked," so that they can take that or  
15 leave that, but at least . . . one of the things that I can only imagine what must be frustrating at  
16 the task force, is because they move from city to city every year and because the volunteers are  
17 so different every year, it must be really difficult to build that institutional memory of what did  
18 they do in Denver last year? What did they do in Houston the year before? And if those  
19 volunteers don't give it to them, they can't magically just know.
- 20 AJ: Wow. Well, it sounds like part of your activism is organizing the movement and we need that.  
21 So, thank you, Rebecca.
- 22 RK: Absolutely.
- 23 AJ: To the extent that you're comfortable, and you've already sort of alluded to and touched on  
24 some of this, talk about medical interventions, the importance; what have you done, sort of  
25 personally . . . and again, to the extent that you are comfortable.
- 26 RK: Absolutely. One of the things that I find sort of ironic about my transition is when I started – for  
27 me, that means when I started going to a therapist to talk about gender in my early 20s. That,  
28 for me, felt like the start of my transition. I went in not knowing what I wanted. I didn't know  
29 that I wanted to go on hormones, I didn't know if I would want surgery, I didn't know if I would  
30 want hair removal. I didn't know what I wanted and one of the things that I found frustrating  
31 about some of the stuff that I read about trans identity is it said, "You have to know, and it has  
32 to be everything or nothing."
- 33 AJ: Right.
- 34 RK: And the therapist that I worked with said, "No, it's an ala cart model, you can pick and choose  
35 what you want."
- 36 AJ: Did she have like a menu?

- 1 RK: She didn't, but she talked like that – like, "You don't need to do more than you want to do."  
2 And, if you start to do something and don't like it, you can change your mind. A lot of the things  
3 we talk about with medical intervention is eventually permanent, but it's usually not permanent  
4 from day one – and learning about it is never permanent.
- 5 AJ: Right.
- 6 RK: Getting information about hormones isn't going to change your body in any way. And so what I  
7 find sort of ironic is as much as I wasn't sure about any of that, I ultimately did all of it. I had  
8 laser hair removal on the vast majority of my body – on my face, my neck, my chest, my  
9 stomach, my arms from my elbows down, my legs down to my toes, and in preparation for  
10 gender re-assignment surgery, around my genitalia. I had hormones – both estrogen,  
11 testosterone blockers, progesterone. I didn't have top surgery because I lucked out with how  
12 the hormones worked for me - so this is me and a little bit of Victoria Secret. And then . . .
- 13 AJ: We'll do a tight shot of your very well-blossomed chest.
- 14 RK: Why thank you. And then I did have gender re-assignment surgery a little over two years ago.  
15 That was all because it felt right for me when I was there, not because I started on day one  
16 saying, "This is what I want." And some people do that . . . and that's OK. Some people who  
17 say, "I'm going to have hormones and I'm going to have hair removal, I'm going to have top  
18 surgery, and I'm going to have bottom surgery, and I'm going to have facial feminization surgery  
19 and I'm going to have a trach shave." If that's what is right for them, that's totally OK. I would  
20 never want to say that my way was the right way to do it. But I do think the wrong way, and  
21 what I encountered, was saying, "Everyone should do it the same way."
- 22 AJ: Yes.
- 23 RK: And so, those decisions that I made were all scary at the time. I went into my therapist saying, "I  
24 don't know that I want this," and she said, "Well, you don't actually have to decide to take  
25 hormones today, you can get more information and then make an appointment with the doctor  
26 – and then keep that appointment with the doctor, and then get a prescription from the doctor,  
27 and then fill that prescription." For me, the idea of breaking it down into smaller steps felt  
28 much, much, much less scary. To be able to say, "All right, tomorrow, I'm going to a doctor to  
29 talk about estrogen," rather than, "I'm doing hormones, I'm going on hormones – it's all or  
30 nothing." And so, for me, the medical intervention that I underwent felt very methodical like  
31 that – this goes back to I'm an over thinker, so it felt very cautious and careful. Fortunately, I've  
32 always been insured and so the doctor's appointments and the estrogen weren't unaffordable  
33 to me. And, my parents have been incredibly, incredibly financially supportive. So my parents  
34 have paid for most of the hair removal I underwent. I would need to go back and sort of  
35 calculate, but certainly \$10,000 or more over a decade at this point. And then when I decided  
36 that gender re-assignment surgery was right for me, I was able to use a combination of savings, I  
37 did some fundraising with friends, I did a fundraising event where we had a big party, and family  
38 support. My insurance did not cover my gender re-assignment surgery, but I also was able to  
39 avoid going \$20,000 into debt – and again, that's the definition of privilege, of having financial  
40 resources to be able to do that.

- 1 AJ: So clearly, you're aware of the privileges.
- 2 RK: I try to be. I think, to some extent, I can't be aware – I can't know what it's like to not have the  
3 privileges that I have, but I try to be conscious of that.
- 4 AJ: That's awesome. So what's your ideas and thoughts about . . . because you named at the  
5 beginning of your medical transition was therapy. So, how long did you engage in therapy prior  
6 to some of the more permanent aspects of hormone therapy, hair removal, gender confirmation  
7 surgery? And, you sort of spoke on this a little bit, but I really want to dig into a little bit about  
8 this idea of therapy versus non-therapy because some people are just like, "I know who I am, I  
9 know what I want, I don't need to spend time sitting in a doctor's office or psychiatrist's office."  
10 What's your thoughts about that?
- 11 RK: Sure. So, going back to my experience with therapy, I had panic attacks and anxiety disorders as  
12 a kid and had horrible, horrible panic attacks and went to therapy as a teenager to try and work  
13 on that, and ultimately did successfully work on that through breathing and visualization  
14 exercises and talk therapy. I haven't had a panic attack, knock on wood, in a decade and a half.
- 15 AJ: Nice.
- 16 RK: That was the first adult I came out to, that therapist. I used that same language I said earlier, "I  
17 think I want to be a girl." I give him a lot of credit for not making it worse. He didn't say there  
18 was anything wrong with me, he didn't say he was going to try to fix it, but he also was very  
19 open in saying, "I don't know a lot about this." And so talking with him was useful in that it  
20 didn't . . . it felt validating to feel like you're not broken, but ultimately what I was looking for  
21 was an adult or some sort of authority figure to say, "This is how it can work." And he didn't  
22 have the knowledge to do that. And then I went to another therapist in my late teens, who was  
23 supposed to specialize around trans issues and gender and identity and who said because I  
24 didn't fit that mold, because I wasn't hating my body, I wasn't certain I wanted surgery, I was  
25 attracted to women mostly, that I probably wasn't trans. And that was really damaging,  
26 because at that point I thought I knew who I was, I just wasn't sure how to act on it – and this  
27 was an authority figure saying, "No, no, no, no – that's wrong." And it wasn't until a couple  
28 years later that I found a therapist who said, "Yeah, you probably know who you are better than  
29 I do, here are some options that you could pursue if you want to." And for me, that was really  
30 valuable. I was not ready to say I know what I need. I was looking for a knowledgeable figure, a  
31 therapist in my case, to help me figure that out. And for me, that was incredibly important and  
32 valuable. I don't question other people who don't have that experience. I think that the  
33 gatekeeper model of saying, "You need a therapist to prove you're really trans," I think that's  
34 horribly problematic. I certainly agree with the informed consent model of saying, "Here are the  
35 risks, here are the rewards, you're an adult and you can make your own decision." I was not yet  
36 ready to take control of my transition in a way that informed consent felt right for me. I was too  
37 uncertain and scared in saying loud and proud, "I am trans," and that transitioning medically is  
38 what I want, that it was important for me to have that sort of therapist to talk me through it.  
39 So, it was probably . . . I started seeing this therapist my junior year . . . no, the beginning of my  
40 senior year of high school, and started taking hormones the middle of my senior year. So it was  
41 probably four months between when I started seeing her and when I decided I wanted to try

- 1 hormones. I feel like I'm a broken record, but I would say again – that was the right decision for  
2 me. I think having that option of an affirming therapist is incredibly important. I don't think,  
3 moving on to your next question, that it needs to be a requirement or should be a requirement.  
4 And by the time, five or six years later, I decided I wanted to start looking into surgery, by that  
5 time I thought the need for me to see two different therapists and get letters from each to  
6 prove to my surgeon that I was trans and this was the right decision, seemed silly to me –  
7 because at that point I was solid enough and certain enough and sure enough in who I was and  
8 what I wanted that, fortunately I was able to say this to my therapist because we'd been seeing  
9 each other . . . I'd been seeing her for five or six years and we had a good relationship. I was  
10 like, "I need this letter from you, I think it's dumb that I need this letter but I want to go through  
11 this process with a surgeon that I want to go to and this surgeon is requiring this."
- 12 AJ: Where did you have surgery?
- 13 RK: I had surgery with Dr. McGinn is based out of New Hope, Pennsylvania – it's about an hour north  
14 of Philadelphia.
- 15 AJ: OK. Pleased?
- 16 RK: Oh, absolutely. So the one thing I would say about Dr. McGinn as a caveat, is she is a very blunt  
17 person. She is not a warm bedside manner, touchy-feely doctor.
- 18 AJ: OK.
- 19 RK: For me, I heard that beforehand, I met with her before I decided to have surgery with her –  
20 which is another financial privilege, that I was able to fly out and meet with her. My mom went  
21 out with me, so I was able to have sort of this advocate with me.
- 22 AJ: Team mom.
- 23 RK: Yes. So for me, I didn't feel like I needed a surgeon who was coming to my bedside and making  
24 sure that I had . . . I've heard of Meltzer in Arizona, apparently has really good ice cream as part  
25 of the post-op care, and I didn't feel like I needed that.
- 26 AJ: Dr. Toby Meltzer. M-e-l-t-z-e-r?
- 27 RK: I think so. And so in terms of the medical care I received, I think it was phenomenal. The  
28 surgery went very well, the recovery time felt accurate to what I had been told – which was  
29 about three months of feeling less and less bad, and then about three months of actually  
30 starting to feel good – but up to a year or so before being done with recovery. So that felt  
31 accurate. Both for my own self looking in mirrors and from partners and lovers I've had, feel like  
32 the results are aesthetically pleasing and I can have orgasms and get myself off . . .
- 33 AJ: Nice.
- 34 RK: . . . and feel like the results are . . . I don't know, functionally pleasing – that sounds really weird  
35 and clinical. So, the one thing I would say about someone looking at McGinn is going with . . . I  
36 would strongly recommend anyone going for surgery to have someone with you because  
37 afterwards you're on morphine and you're exhausted and you're hurting, so you want someone

- 1           there who can help. I would say with McGinn, in particular, it was not a touchy-feely  
2           experience. I don't mean that as a negative, I just mean that as like . . . she's a bad-ass, she was  
3           a naval flight surgeon and is trans herself.
- 4   AJ:     Oh really?
- 5   RK:     Yes. She was qualified to fly in the space shuttle, although she never went, but she got  
6           astronaut training. I like her a lot as a person and I think she's a great doctor, but I could  
7           imagine someone who didn't have a strong support there - didn't have their mom there, didn't  
8           have a good friend there, being a little more scary. I don't know – does that make sense?
- 9   AJ:     Absolutely, yeah. I would advocate for the same thing and strongly encourage people to have  
10           some support in that process – for any surgery, actually.
- 11   RK:    Yeah, I agree.
- 12   AJ:     So just thinking back a little bit over your decision to express your true gender identity, were  
13           there any pivotal moments that you can point to and would you do anything differently?
- 14   RK:     Pivotal moments? I think coming out to my parents was a pivotal moment, both positively and  
15           negatively. So, I came out around 14 using that same language, "I think I want to be a girl," and  
16           my mom said, "We'll love you no matter what," and my dad said, "We'll love you whatever you  
17           are as long as you're not a Republican."
- 18   AJ:     OK, got it.
- 19   RK:     I have my dad's sense of humor.
- 20   AJ:     Yeah, we heard you dad.
- 21   RK:     On the one hand, that is incredible that before any of these groups and before any of the  
22           conferences and camps that exist now for trans youth, that their immediate and intuitive  
23           response was, "We love you." At the same time, they didn't know what to do about it. It wasn't  
24           in *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and there weren't books about trans youth and there  
25           weren't books for parents with trans youth and there weren't groups for parents to go to and  
26           there weren't conferences for trans youth issues. I work with Camp Aranu'tiq, which is a camp  
27           for trans and gender-variant youth – that certainly didn't exist.
- 28   AJ:     Camp . . . ?
- 29   RK:     Aranu'tiq. A-r-a-n-u apostrophe t-i-q.
- 30   AJ:     OK. Where does that happen?
- 31   RK:     That's out of New Hampshire and then we rent a space in California. We have our own campsite  
32           in New Hampshire. And it's phenomenal – I've been working with them for the last four years  
33           and I'm now on the leadership staff there. It's 80-120 trans and gender-variant youth canoeing  
34           and arts and crafts and drama, and drama, and singing songs and hiking in the woods and doing  
35           archery and field games. The founder, Nick Teich, is a trans man and went to Girl Scout Camp

- 1 growing up and feels very strongly about camp as a space for people. So it's intention . . . it's  
2 not group therapy, it's not political activism camp, it is summer camp.
- 3 AJ: Sure.
- 4 RK: And as much as I'm a fan of therapy and activism training, I do think there's huge value in being  
5 able to have kids in a place where they can be just kids. And so none of that existed 16 or 17  
6 years ago when I was coming out to my parents.
- 7 AJ: For trans kids, right?
- 8 RK: For trans kids specifically – where everyone there, all the counselors . . . or rather, all the  
9 campers and about half the counselors are trans or gender variant.
- 10 AJ: Does it happen on each coast?
- 11 RK: So there's one- and two-week sessions in New Hampshire and then there's just a one-week  
12 session in California.
- 13 AJ: That's fascinating.
- 14 RK: Do you want to come be a counselor next year?
- 15 AJ: I was not aware of this project, I'm pretty sure I would not have time to come be a camp  
16 counselor but thank you for the invitation.
- 17 RK: Absolutely. And so, going back to coming out to my parents – on the one hand it was amazing  
18 and positive, and on the other hand, they didn't know what to do. When I wanted to learn to  
19 ride a bike, they knew what to do about that; when I wanted to play the piano, they knew what  
20 to do about that; when I said I wanted to be a girl, they didn't know what to do about that. And  
21 it was reassuring that they weren't going to kick me out or try to change me, and again as a  
22 trans person, those are very real possibilities when coming out to parents as a teenager. On the  
23 other hand, I do look with some jealousy at these kids who are 14,15, 16 . . . 7, 8, 9 and are  
24 transitioning and wonder if I had been born a decade later, 15 years later, if that would have  
25 been my experience. And so I don't know that I . . . I don't know that I could have done anything  
26 differently there, I wish the world had been different. In terms of what I wanted to do  
27 differently, I wish I had felt more confident in knowing who I was . . . not even knowing,  
28 believing I knew who I was. So when I saw that therapist as a late teen, and she said, "No,  
29 you're probably not trans," I wish I had had the confidence to say, "You're wrong, can you help  
30 me get on hormones?" And now as someone in her early 30s, the difference between 19 and 21  
31 feels like less than it did at the time – at the time, the difference between 19 and 21 feels like an  
32 epic-ly long time, so I don't know that there are huge life decisions I would have made  
33 differently, but I do wish I had felt more confident earlier to say what felt true to me. And I  
34 certainly wish that the world had been different and better and that there had been more  
35 resources for me and my parents.
- 36 AJ: Right, right. Love, relationships, dating while trans, sexual orientation.



- 1 RK: So I've always been mostly attracted to women and so in high school and college, I dated a  
2 couple of cis women – a couple of whom I was not out to and one or two who I was. And those  
3 relationships were very important in that . . . particularly the one that I had later in college, it  
4 was someone who I was out to before we started dating. It had never occurred to me that  
5 someone might actually be attracted to me once they knew I was trans. And this was before I  
6 had started transitioning. And so that was very . . . I don't know, a moment of growth of, "Oh, I  
7 can be seen as attractive," and, "I can be seen as sexual." And as I started transitioning, we  
8 continued to date – that sort of validation there. That relationship didn't work out for a lot of  
9 reasons – part of it was dating someone while transitioning is really hard, and dating someone  
10 who is transitioning is really hard. The language I've started to use . . .
- 11 AJ: Dating someone who has transitioned is hard.
- 12 RK: And that we don't transition at other people – like my transition was not about the person I was  
13 dating, but it certainly impacts the people in our lives.
- 14 AJ: Oh yes, absolutely.
- 15 RK: Since I've, at least, socially transitioned, because I continued to date before I had surgery and  
16 while I was in that process, I haven't had a ton of long-term relationships. I'm really quite out,  
17 you can Google Rebecca Kling and the first thing that comes up is my artist website and the third  
18 word is transgender . . . maybe the fourth word, "Rebecca Kling is a transgender artist . . ." Fifth  
19 word. So not only am I not stealth, I'm pretty darn out. And so, in terms of dating while trans,  
20 I've never really had to navigate the idea of how or if to tell someone because I lead with it  
21 pretty early. Again, that's been the right decision for me. I don't question or disagree with  
22 anyone who handles their disclosure differently. On the one hand it makes things a little easier  
23 because I don't have to deal with disclosure; on the other hand, I'm sure I've lost out on  
24 potential . . . I know I've lost out on potential hook-ups or relationships where someone might  
25 have been more interested in dating me if I had rolled out my trans-ness a little later. And so I,  
26 again, feel pretty lucky in my dating life. I more feel like being an activist and being a touring  
27 artist impacts dating because I'm out of town quite a lot and my schedule is really hectic.
- 28 AJ: That can do it.
- 29 RK: So living in a big city like Chicago where there is a pretty solid queer community, being of a  
30 generation that uses online dating as a tool, and saying how it is – as someone who has  
31 relatively high passing privilege, I feel like dating has not been super difficult for me. And in that  
32 way, again, I keep using . . . I'm not the type of person to use the word blessed, that word  
33 doesn't resonate with me, but privileged, lucky, fortunate in sex and dating as well as in a lot of  
34 other places.
- 35 AJ: Wow, that's good. So there's been some impacts but certainly it hasn't completely . . .
- 36 RK: No, I have not found that my dating life has died because I'm trans.
- 37 AJ: Yeah. Are you involved in a long-term relationship now?

- 1 RK: No, the last long-term relationship I was in ended over the summer and was . . . I forget if it was  
2 eight or nine months, and that was the longest relationship I'd been in since this woman that I  
3 dated in college. And it was lovely – we weren't right for each other ultimately, but it was nice  
4 to be in a stable relationship for a while. It's been a number of years since I've had that and the  
5 frustrating thing is, now that it's over I'm like, "Oh wait, I do like that – I do like being in  
6 relationships, I do want that."
- 7 AJ: So you were reminded . . . ?
- 8 RK: Yeah. So now that Creating Change is finally over and I have some brain cells left to think about  
9 things other than organizing Creating Change, I do want to think about how and whether it's  
10 online dating or meet-up groups or hitting up friends and saying, "Hey, set me up with that cutie  
11 that you . . ."
- 12 AJ: Sure – well, good luck.
- 13 RK: Thanks.
- 14 AJ: Have there been times when people have either been super, super helpful or super . . . really  
15 insensitive in institutional spaces? So, like Northwestern University or the medical industrial  
16 complex, or the criminal justice system.
- 17 RK: Yes, although – again, on the scale of bullshit that trans people have to deal with, on the lighter  
18 end. So . . .
- 19 AJ: I just want to stop and say - yes, life is infinitely worse for a whole bunch of people, but we're  
20 really just talking about your life. If I get a hangnail, that really hurts me – that is not the same  
21 as getting my hand amputated, but no one should minimize my own pain.
- 22 RK: I appreciate that validation. I think . . . I get very frustrated with activists, in particular with trans  
23 activists who lose all sense of perspective and so I may be erring too far on the side . . . so I  
24 appreciate that reminder.
- 25 AJ: That's fine, I just wanted to point that out.
- 26 RK: Thank you. So a couple of things that come to mind – first of all, the therapist who told me that  
27 I wasn't trans, that's super problematic. Giving her the benefit of the doubt, I assume she's  
28 working with an older model of trans experience and trans identity where being trans means  
29 something very narrow and small and boxed. I think that's bad, I think that's a problem. Other  
30 things I can think of – I was fired from a teaching position for being trans.
- 31 AJ: That's pretty bad.
- 32 RK: Fortunately, it was not my only source of income, it was a part-time thing. It wasn't my primary  
33 source of income but it was both emotionally and financially horrible.
- 34 AJ: Yes.
- 35 RK: Beyond that . . . so in 2010, I had my gall bladder removed. I found out I needed my gall bladder  
36 removed by going in through the ER. I went into the . . . I had, usually about once a month or so,

- 1           horrible, horrible stomach pain. Both sides of my family have a history of gastrointestinal issues  
2           so I sort of just assumed it was that and maybe when you're 25 you can't drink and eat the same  
3           way you do when you're 18.
- 4   AJ:     Sure.
- 5   RK:     And, went to the ER one night and after being there for maybe six or seven hours, from maybe  
6           2am to 8 or 9am, was discharged and was told I had horrible constipation and that was it. I later  
7           found out, when I went to the ER again a month later, that I had a disgusting number of gall  
8           stones, that my gall bladder was infected and it needed to be removed. And when I asked, and  
9           this was at a different ER, when I asked at that different ER, "Could this have developed in the  
10          last month?" They said, "No, this has been brewing for years." I went back, after I was  
11          discharged and everything, I went back to the first ER and said, "Hey, what the hell?"
- 12   AJ:     Right.
- 13   RK:     They said, "Oh, on your chart we noticed that you had gall stones, but we didn't feel it was  
14           medically necessary to tell you." I will never know if that had anything to do with me being  
15           trans. Nothing that happened to me there was explicitly transphobic. I never had a doctor say  
16           anything problematic to me . . .
- 17   AJ:     They weren't mis-gendering you?
- 18   RK:     I don't remember. I was tired . . .
- 19   AJ:     You're in pain – yeah.
- 20   RK:     I don't remember being mis-gendered. I remember having to answer the same question over  
21           and over again about why I was on the drugs that I was on – I was on estrogen and testosterone  
22           blockers.
- 23   AJ:     The person that came in the room was like, "Hey, you're taking a whole bunch of estrogen."
- 24   RK:     Right, but that didn't feel harmful at the time, it just felt like nurses who hadn't been clued in.
- 25   AJ:     Right.
- 26   RK:     I've wondered since then, though, if they sort of just wanted to get rid of me as a patient. This  
27           was before I'd had gender re-assignment surgery. I was still presenting socially and my name  
28           was legally Rebecca, but I've wondered since then if they sort of wanted to get rid of me. It was  
29           interesting, the contrast at the other hospital that I went to – I had been there, again I grew up  
30           in this area so I'd been there as a kid, so when they pulled my name up in the system it was my  
31           old name. And so when they printed wristbands for me, it was my old name and my mom was  
32           furious about that. I think she just wanted something to be angry about because her baby was  
33           in pain. But I was very impressed – within half an hour, someone from HR and said, "We  
34           apologize profusely, we've updated our records, we're printing you a new name band." I don't  
35           remember having any other problems. And so that sort of contrast. In terms of the legal system  
36           or criminal justice system, when I went to legally get my name changed, I didn't have any  
37           problems – the judge was just sort of a jerk and kept calling me sir. So he didn't hold up the

- 1 name change, it went through fine, but that was sort of a douche-y thing to do, an asshole thing  
2 to do.
- 3 AJ: Yeah, he sort of let you know his personal feelings or whatever – yeah.
- 4 RK: Beyond that . . . oh, so about Northwestern. Now I know from talking with students and folks  
5 who work at Northwestern, they have better resources. When I was there, I didn't feel like they  
6 had particularly good resources for trans folks. The LGBT groups I went to were really just LG  
7 groups. The housing certainly didn't have any trans-inclusive housing, the women's . . . I  
8 reached out to a number of organizations on campus looking for resources and they all sort of  
9 sent me to stuff in the city. Which – we live in a city that has some good resources, so sending  
10 me to Howard Brown and the Center on Halsted was fine, but I know now, almost a decade  
11 since I've graduated, that Northwestern does have more resources on campus – at the time, it  
12 really felt like the attitude there was, "We're not against trans folks, but we have nothing to  
13 offer you."
- 14 AJ: Right.
- 15 RK: Which isn't the worst, it's a step towards being better, but was really frustrating.
- 16 AJ: But it wasn't personally directed or . . .
- 17 RK: No, not that I remember. It was more just I emailed the Women's Center, I emailed the LGBT  
18 group looking for resources, and they said, "Oh, we wish we could help you, but we really don't  
19 have anything."
- 20 AJ: Who was the first trans or gender-queer person you encountered or met?
- 21 RK: Definitely online.
- 22 AJ: OK.
- 23 RK: And I remember talking with folks through message boards and talking with folks through AOL  
24 Instant Chat or talking with folks through ICQ – none of which exist . . . well, all of which exist  
25 but none of which anyone uses anymore.
- 26 AJ: Yeah.
- 27 RK: Those are still companies that exist. And then when I was in high school going to an LGBT group  
28 and sort of talking with the adult organizer, who – at the time seemed so much older than me  
29 although was probably like 23 to my, like, 14 or 15, and she gave me *Gender Outlaws*, Kate  
30 Bornstein's book.
- 31 AJ: Oh, OK.
- 32 RK: And that was really eye opening and sort of feeling like, "OK, there are other people that have  
33 these experiences, not all of them are as negative or as awful as some of these websites I'm  
34 reading seem to say." Unfortunately, there wasn't anyone else in the group at the time who  
35 was out as trans, and so it wasn't until I was in college and starting going to stuff at the  
36 Broadway Youth Center, which is a great Chicago organization, that I met other people my age

- 1           who were trans. I remember at the youth group in high school, we had some trans speakers  
2           come but they were later-in-life transitioners in their 50s who I didn't feel like their experience  
3           was super relevant to mine.
- 4   AJ:     Right – yeah. I get that.
- 5   RK:     So it wasn't until I was in my late teens or early 20s that I felt like I met other trans people, in  
6           person, who were sort of like me.
- 7   AJ:     So you were a theatre major.
- 8   RK:     Performance studies.
- 9   AJ:     Performance studies.
- 10   RK:    A difference only important to performance studies majors. It's like theatre with more paper  
11           writing.
- 12   AJ:     Exactly. But you are a performer and you're sort of interested in this whole process around  
13           casting and so forth and so on. I just want to hear your thoughts around all of the hullabaloo  
14           around cis gender characters playing transgender roles in Hollywood.
- 15   RK:     Absolutely. First and foremost, I don't think any group should be able to have a monopoly on  
16           telling that group's story, so I think it is, in general, OK for trans people to tell narratives with cis  
17           folk, cis people to tell trans narratives, for someone of a different racial experience to talk about  
18           stories of that race or gender or ethnicity or age, or whatever. However, if you're telling a story  
19           that is not part of your legacy and history, you need to be really careful and intentional about it.  
20           And so, the objection that I have isn't right out, "This is a trans character played by a cis person,"  
21           it's that it's a trans character played by a cis person who they didn't do their research or is  
22           poorly written or is offensive for other reasons. Jen Richards, who is an activist and now a  
23           screenwriter whose first web series was just released, has said . . .
- 24   AJ:     *Her Story*.
- 25   RK:     *Her Story*, which is phenomenal.
- 26   AJ:     Yes.
- 27   RK:     That part of her objection of some of . . . like transphobic jokes in sitcoms, isn't only that they're  
28           offensive, it's that they're lazy writing. That if that's the joke you're making, you haven't  
29           thought through this character very well. And I think some of my objections of things like Jared  
30           Leto in *Dallas Buyer's Club*, or that sort of thing, isn't only that it's a cis person playing a trans  
31           role, but that it's a cis person playing a really lazily written trans role that is reductionist and not  
32           very creative.
- 33   AJ:     Right.
- 34   RK:     So I think with what is going on in Hollywood right now, the important thing to me is that trans  
35           voices are in the room and are involved in the process. If the best casting decision is then a cis  
36           person, I'll be disappointed but I don't think that inherently means the director is transphobic or

1 that the project is awful. I think the contrast with things like Jeffrey Tambor in *Transparent*,  
 2 where it's not a perfect show, but they are clearly trying. They have hired trans folks and they  
 3 have cast trans people in supporting roles, and they have hired a trans writer for season two.  
 4 None of that automatically means that the show is good or that the show is above criticism, but  
 5 the way Jeffrey Tambor has talked in interviews and the way that it is Jill Soloway's story of her  
 6 parents transitioning make it feel like it is a nuanced and truly told story rather than something  
 7 like *Dallas Buyer's Club* where it's a magical trans person who is helping the cis person learn a  
 8 lesson. I feel like those are very different things. I would always like to see more trans voices as  
 9 acting, as casting agents, and as writers and as producers and as directors and as all of the  
 10 above, but I don't, as a performance studies major, I do think it's appropriate to approach it with  
 11 some nuance. I can understand why people don't have the patience for that – like nuance takes  
 12 time and is sometimes really hard. So I can understand the trans activist who is saying, "There  
 13 should only be trans people playing trans roles." I don't agree with that position but I can totally  
 14 understand where they're coming from.

15 AJ: Wow, thank you for that insight.

16 RK: Absolutely. At some point when you're not interviewing me, I want to hear your take.

17 AJ: Sure, absolutely. I'd be happy to share it. What do you think about the relationship between  
 18 the L, the G, the B, and the T? Clearly the first three letters I identified are sort of sexual  
 19 orientations, transgender, gender non-conforming, gender queer . . . no, gender queer is sort of  
 20 vacillates between sexual and . . .

21 RK: It depends on the individual person.

22 AJ: Right, sexual orientation and gender identity. But, what do you think that relationship is? Is  
 23 there a need to really sort of hollow out the T and develop a separate movement or can we all  
 24 continue to sort of work together, if we ever have?

25 RK: I think yes to all of the above. I think from a political standpoint, from an activist standpoint,  
 26 they have to be together because when a kid is getting bullied in school or when someone is  
 27 being harassed in the bathroom, or when TSA is giving someone a hard time at the airport . . .

28 AJ: It's about their gender.

29 RK: . . . they do not care if you're really trans, they care how they see you. And so, to talk about  
 30 LGB rights without talking about trans rights, and vice versa, is ignoring the ideological problems  
 31 of that because I think we do better when we ban together, is just politically short-sighted  
 32 because . . . if, hypothetically, you get a non-inclusive ENDA passed, you get an employment non-  
 33 discrimination act passed without trans people, you're still going to see cis gay people getting  
 34 fired for being too femme, or cis lesbians getting fired for being too butch, because the bigots  
 35 don't care. So from a political standpoint, from an activist standpoint, it seems incredibly foolish  
 36 and short-sighted. From an ideological standpoint and from an emotional standpoint, it also . . .  
 37 I'm interested in intersectional justice to begin with, and so I want my trans rights to also be gay  
 38 rights and my gay rights to also be labor rights and my labor rights also to be racial rights and my  
 39 racial rights also to be prison rights and my prison . . . and so, to talk about these finely grained  
 40 distinctions, I don't think . . . it's not the direction I hope our movement is going anyway. I do

1 think, from an education standpoint, it is important to make that distinction to talk about why  
 2 sexuality is different than gender identity and how sexuality is different than gender identity and  
 3 that not all trans people are gay or straight or asexual or bisexual or queer or whatever, not all  
 4 trans people are anything. And so I think there needs to be, and should be, conversation and  
 5 organizing within the trans community that is just trans, but I think that should be towards the  
 6 goal of a trans rights movement that is also all of those other things – gay rights and race rights  
 7 and labor rights and immigration rights, and all of that jazz. Shifting back to Creating Change  
 8 this week, one of the big disruptions, protests, arguments that happened this week at Creating  
 9 Change, was between a group around LGBT Judaism and Israeli LGBT activists and around anti-  
 10 Israel and activists who were talking about Palestinian rights. I think a bit part of the disconnect  
 11 there was the idea that they aren't . . . they can't be the same thing. There were accusations  
 12 that activists on behalf of Palestinians are inherently anti-Semitic or that activists on behalf of  
 13 LGBTQ Jews in Israel are inherently anti-Arab. And some of them are, to be sure. But I bet the  
 14 vast majority of them, if they sat down face-to-face with each other, could find more common  
 15 ground than difference. Maybe that's naïve of me, maybe that's optimistic of me, and so I think  
 16 in terms of the LGB versus the T, it feels incredibly foolish and short-sighted for the LGB folks to  
 17 say we don't want anything to do with the T because when someone's throwing a brick or you  
 18 or firing you, they don't care – they don't care the difference. And it seems hypocritical for the T  
 19 to talk about trans rights without talking about those other things because trans people are also  
 20 gay and lesbian and are also people of color and also are immigrants and are also all those other  
 21 things.

22 AJ: Wow.

23 RK: So that's my soapbox answer.

24 AJ: That's a great answer. Kind of winding down a little bit, you sort of flowed into my next  
 25 question, which is great. So what do you think the agenda should be for the trans community  
 26 going forward?

27 RK: I think it's really great you're empowering me to make this decision on behalf of everyone.

28 AJ: Of the entire community – you get to set the table.

29 RK: We had a vote, everyone chose me . . . oh God, that's terrifying. I think any civil rights  
 30 movement needs to focus on the most at-risk, which is clearly, in this moment in the United  
 31 States, trans women of color – particularly, Black trans women. Everyone needs to be involved.  
 32 As I said, as a white privileged trans woman, I was still fired and that's still problematic. My  
 33 privilege does not shield me from ever being a victim of bigotry. And so saying we need to  
 34 center the voices of trans people of color, particularly Black trans women, doesn't mean we can  
 35 afford to forget about all the other trans people.

36 AJ: Sure.

37 RK: But I think all of the . . . if one, can't see the way that racism still plays out in every level of  
 38 American society, that person is looking at a different country than I am. And so, I think all of  
 39 the civil rights work that we're talking about in terms of labor rights and in terms of immigration  
 40 rights, in terms of prison reform, in terms of all those . . . that whole laundry list of stuff. If a big

1 part of that isn't people of color, it's not a movement that I feel excited about supporting.  
 2 Again, as a white activist, I hope that my voice is useful and can be included and that there is  
 3 absolutely work that needs to be done for white folks too. Transphobia isn't only against trans  
 4 people of color, but I think the trans rights movement, as well as the larger LGBT movement, has  
 5 to have, and is having, some of those difficult conversations of we have a lot of organizations  
 6 that have been built over 20 or 30 years from the gay rights movement, which was primarily a  
 7 white cis movement, in large part because they pushed out trans people and people of color.  
 8 And so then how do you shift from organizations like HRC or NCTE, which is a trans organization,  
 9 or the task force or any of these other organizations that have been run and funded by wealthy  
 10 white cis folks for, in some cases, decades. And, emotionally I can understand a wealthy white  
 11 cis person saying, "Well, why should my money be going towards this other thing?" Again, I  
 12 think that's short-sighted and , but I think the conversation that us white folks need to have, us  
 13 white folks, is how do we sell that to other people, and how do we sell, unfortunately I don't  
 14 have the money to fund HRC or to fund the task force, or to fund whatever this is – so how do I  
 15 sell the people who do, on this idea of solidarity as more than just lip service, of actually putting  
 16 their money and their resources where their mouths are.

17 AJ: Wow. Have you ever worked for or volunteered for any trans or LGBT organization other than  
 18 Camp . . . what's it called?

19 RK: Camp Aranu'tiq.

20 AJ: Aranu'tiq or the task force on Creating Change?

21 RK: I've worked peripherally with a ton. I've worked with About Face Theatre which is a Chicago  
 22 LGBTQ theatre and they do wonderful work. I'm on the board, although this relatively recent so  
 23 I'm still getting my sea legs, I'm on the board with the Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, which is an  
 24 organization working for youth safety, particularly in schools, around LGBT issues. And I love the  
 25 way that they approach the intersectionality of their work – that they have been set up, they  
 26 were founded in part by Queer Women of Color, that have been set up to value diversity  
 27 because it makes us stronger not because it is checking boxes on what a group should look like.  
 28 I've worked a little with MCTE and I'm certainly friends with a bunch of folks there, I haven't  
 29 done much work with HRC or the task force, outside of Creating Change – I would love to if  
 30 anyone is hiring. If anyone is hiring, please email me.

31 AJ: Yes – we'll be posting your head shot and all of that stuff later. Awesome. Man, we're really  
 32 winding down here. Last question . . . actually, let's do a couple more. Caitlyn Jenner, the most  
 33 visible transgender identity on the planet right now, arguably. So Caitlyn Jenner invisibility, you  
 34 started out the interview talking about Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, the really, sort of, increased  
 35 mainstreaming of transgender identity. I want you to speak specifically about Caitlyn and what  
 36 her impact is, but also just more broadly about the visibility and how that is impacting the  
 37 movement.

38 RK: So Caitlyn specifically – I think what frustrates me in some of the anti-Caitlyn sentiment from the  
 39 trans community, is a lack of empathy. Absolutely having a billion-plus dollars, I don't know that  
 40 she has that much money, but having millions and millions and millions of dollars makes your  
 41 life a lot fucking easier, as does being white. And so, no question – Caitlyn Jenner has a lot of



1 ways in which her being trans is easier than possibly anyone else on the planet because of the  
2 amount of money she has. On the other hand, being trans is not easy.

3 AJ: Really?

4 RK: What's frustrated me . . . I was in a conversation at the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference  
5 last year, so this was when Caitlyn was more in the news, and a couple people were complaining  
6 about Caitlyn Jenner and I finally said, "Is there any way she could have come out that wouldn't  
7 have pissed you off?" They were like, "No, we just want her to go to an island somewhere and  
8 be with . . ." I don't understand that – I don't understand that lack of empathy. You can  
9 disagree with her and you can disagree with what she says – and I disagree with a lot of what  
10 she says, I disagree with probably every political belief she holds, but I can empathize that this  
11 has been a difficult process for her – and it was hard for me walking from my car to work  
12 transitioning when I knew no one gave a shit. I can't imagine having paparazzi chasing me down  
13 and yelling mean things to me and photographing me and putting my face on the cover of  
14 magazines. So, first and foremost, I would like to see some of the activists in our community  
15 have a little more empathy for everyone. The other thing that I think people of broadly my  
16 generation and younger, so mid-30s and younger, forget is the amount of fame Caitlyn Jenner  
17 had as an athlete before she was famous with the Kardashian clan. For me, Caitlyn Jenner was  
18 never ever an athlete – Caitlyn Jenner was part of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and part of  
19 tabloid magazines and part of this sort of idea that your famous because you're rich and famous.  
20 For people my parent's generation who grew up seeing Caitlyn Jenner be the best athlete in the  
21 world and on the cover of Wheatie's boxes and internationally celebrated . . .

22 AJ: That was my experience.

23 RK: Yeah. I think we younger folks forget the value and power of having someone you saw one way  
24 coming out as trans and re-thinking that. And so shifting to the idea of visibility, visibility is not  
25 an end-all, be-all. Purely, the idea of visibility can't fix institutional racism, can't fix institutional  
26 transphobia, can't change laws, can't prevent hate crimes. But every survey has shown if you  
27 know someone who is gay, you are more likely to support marriage equality; if you know  
28 someone who is trans, you're more likely to support trans rights. And, for a lot of people, the  
29 Diane Sawyer interview and the *I am Cait* TV show was a way for them to feel like they were  
30 getting to know someone who they already thought they knew – it was a coming out story for  
31 them, in communities across the country where they may not have any out trans people.  
32 Visibility can be oversold – it's not an end-all, be-all, there are things that are more important  
33 than visibility, but I think a lot of the complaints around Caitlyn felt like throwing her under the  
34 bus from members of our own community that was actually wrapped up with a lot of legitimate  
35 class frustration and legitimate economic disparity and legitimate race frustration, and so I  
36 would love to see Caitlyn make a commitment to give away every penny of hers to trans rights  
37 groups. I would love to see Caitlyn say, "*I am Cait* is going to be 10 minutes of me and then 45  
38 minutes of trans people of color."

39 AJ: Angelica Ross.

40 RK: Angelica Ross. I would love to see that. I think that it's not realistic and that the complaints are  
41 bigger than just her. It makes me think of . . . there was some fashion magazine that did a

- 1 spread with trans people and all of them were conventionally attractive and there was  
2 complaints online . . .
- 3 AJ: They were beautiful.
- 4 RK: . . . “such bullshit that this is just celebrating one type of trans person.” And the response that I  
5 saw, which I thought made so much sense, was like, “Well then let’s complain about the fashion  
6 industry, let’s not beat up these trans people for being celebrated.” And I started to feel the  
7 same way with Caitlyn, let’s absolutely complain about reality TV and complain about economic  
8 disparities and complain about racial divides and racial privilege, but let’s not use that to say  
9 that Caitlyn, who I think is trying to do the best she can, is some sort of horrible scummy person.  
10 I don’t think she’s done everything right, I don’t think she’s done everything perfectly, I also  
11 don’t think she’s the worst thing in the world – and something I’ve been talking about to people  
12 about Creating Change, about Philadelphia Trans Health that I think applies to Caitlyn too, is her  
13 existence and visibility doing more harm than good? I don’t think it is. I think her existence and  
14 visibility is doing more good than harm.
- 15 AJ: Perfect. I think that’s really a good way for us to end this conversation.
- 16 RK: Absolutely.
- 17 AJ: Rebecca, I just want to thank you for your time and your generosity, your forthrightness and  
18 expressing your own personal opinions, and, the advocacy, I think, that comes through in your  
19 conversation.
- 20 RK: I appreciate that. Thank you.
- 21 AJ: Thank you, and this is Andrea signing off.
- 22 RK: And one of these days we’ll get coffee and I’ll ask you all these questions.
- 23 RJ: There you go. All right-y.