

Jess Dugan
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

January 22, 2016



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 Jess Dugan -JD
3

4 AJ: So, hi.

5 JD: Hi.

6 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project.
7 Today is January 22, 2016. We are in very chilly Chicago, Illinois, and I'm talking to a new friend,
8 Jess Dugan. I'm going to ask you, Jess, to introduce yourself. Can you tell me your preferred
9 gender pronouns, tell me your gender identity and your gender assigned at birth.

10 JD: OK. So my name is Jess Dugan. I am female assigned at birth. I currently use female pronouns
11 although I have not always done so. I identify as gender queer and gender variant.

12 AJ: Jess, spell your name just so that the transcriptionist is clear.

13 JD: Sure. It's J-e-s-s and my last name is D-u-g-a-n.

14 AJ: I know Dugan is sometimes spelled with two g's.

15 JD: Yeah.

16 AJ: Thank you. So, just to get started out, tell me what is your earliest memory – like the first thing
17 you remember in life? It doesn't have to be related to your gender identity at all, though if it is
18 that's great and that's perfectly fine.

19 JD: That's a tough question. I don't actually know what my first memory is. Sometimes I get
20 confused with what I remember from pictures and stories and what I remember from the
21 moment.

22 AJ: Yeah.

23 JD: The thing that comes to mind is my parents getting divorced when I was 7. That's one of the
24 first things I really remember experiencing. Yeah.

25 AJ: Where did you grow up?

26 JD: I grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. I lived just outside of Little Rock in a town called Sherwood. I
27 lived there until . . . well, I lived in Arkansas until I was 12 turning 13, but I lived in several
28 different apartments and houses in and around Sherwood.

29 AJ: So you went to elementary school outside of Little Rock? Sherwood?

30 JD: I actually went in Little Rock.

31 AJ: Oh you went in Little Rock.

32 JD: I went to a school in Little Rock. I was in a school that had a gifted and talented program that
33 was also kind of . . . I'm trying to think of the right language. It was also part of an integration

- 1 effort in the city so I was bussed 45 minutes to go to this school. But it was in Little Rock, it's
2 right by the airport.
- 3 AJ: That's interesting because I was going to bring that up. Little Rock is the site of the Brown vs the
4 Board of Education and one of the school districts that was sort of first . . . most violently sort of
5 integrated.
- 6 JD: Yes.
- 7 AJ: But it seems like there was a reverse sort of integration.
- 8 JD: Yeah, it's funny because . . .
- 9 AJ: Usually the Black kids were being bussed to white communities.
- 10 JD: Yeah. It is kind of reverse and it's one of those things that I obviously . . . or perhaps not
11 obviously, but I wasn't fully aware of as a younger child and became more consciously aware of
12 later. But yeah, it was a . . . I went to a school that was in a predominantly African American,
13 low income neighborhood. But there was a lot of friction between local students and those of
14 us who came in for this program. And it was a complicated place to be for a number of reasons.
15 For those reasons and also for me around my gender, that was the first . . . school was one of
16 the first places where it really became difficult. I think when it . . . when I became very
17 conscious of being different.
- 18 AJ: Really?
- 19 JD: So when I think of that school I think of the larger issues going on but also my experience in that
20 place.
- 21 AJ: OK. It was pointed out . . . was it violent, was there bullying?
- 22 JD: I wouldn't say . . . it was not violent, but I liked to joke that I looked kind of the same then as I do
23 now. I had short hair, from as soon as I could pick my own clothing I wanted boy's clothes.
- 24 AJ: Was it that your hair just wouldn't grow or you just really preferred short hair.
- 25 JD: No, I adamantly wanted short hair.
- 26 AJ: Your hair looks pretty thick and it looks like it would grow pretty long.
- 27 JD: It is pretty thick. No, just all of my friends were boys, I gravitated towards masculine clothing,
28 and I kind of grew up being perceived as a little boy in Arkansas, except that I was not supposed
29 to be a little boy. So from the time I was five, I would say, I became aware of that. So at school,
30 I would get picked on and I would have a lot of trouble around the bathroom. I have a lot of
31 memories as an eight and nine-year-old being chased out of restrooms by students and
32 teachers. And I had . . . well I should say, my parents got divorced. My mom came out as a
33 lesbian when I was 7, my parents got divorced, and around the time I was 8 or 9, I came home
34 from school and I was crying because I was getting harassed so much in the bathroom and
35 getting picked on at school. My mom said to me, "Well, you can grow your hair out and look like
36 a girl and this will stop, or you can stay how you are and be proud of that and just realize that

- 1 it's going to be a little bit more difficult." So that to me was a really amazing gift that she gave
2 me and also gave me the permission . . . or gave me the support at home to keep kind of going
3 against the grain more publicly and at school.
- 4 AJ: Wow, that's fascinating on multiple levels. A, that you have that kind of support; and B, that
5 bathroom and these kinds of gendered spaces was already being policed for you.
- 6 JD: Yeah.
- 7 AJ: I don't think people began to experience that or at least the people that I've talked to don't
8 begin to experience that until sometimes later.
- 9 JD: Well I think I became so conscious of my gender being different because it was constantly being
10 reflected back at me. It's taken me a long time to feel comfortable in restrooms and feel like I'm
11 allowed to use those spaces. But yeah, it started really early for me – and I even had . . . I
12 remember my 5th grade teacher who, ironically, has sort of become a supporter of what I do
13 now, but I vividly . . .
- 14 AJ: Is that right? You still have a relationship with your 5th grade teacher?
- 15 JD: On Facebook. But I vividly remember her yelling at me for wearing my pants too low and not
16 being lady-like and not sitting the right way. And so, yeah, it was just always kind of pushed on
17 me that I was not a little girl the way you were supposed to be.
- 18 AJ: You were not conforming to the gender norms of our culture and society.
- 19 JD: Yeah.
- 20 AJ: How did your classmates deal with that?
- 21 JD: You know, in elementary school I don't know. I had several friends. It was more often people I
22 didn't know as well who would have a problem with it. I was also still dealing with, at that time,
23 just telling people that my mom was a lesbian because that was difficult in Little Rock.
- 24 AJ: That's a thing – yes.
- 25 JD: I had lots of different parent configurations, so it was complicated. I think, in terms of my
26 friends, that didn't get more complicated for me until high school or until kind of puberty and
27 locker rooms and that kind of thing. Yeah. But I had several good friends as a child, both male
28 and female friends and none of my gender difference seemed to be a deal breaker until we all
29 kind of hit puberty and then things changed a bit. But yeah, even in elementary school I always .
30 . . I just never quite fit in with either kind of group of people or activity. At recess I would always
31 play with the boys.
- 32 AJ: Wow. So I think you said you didn't stay in Arkansas the entirety of your childhood. Where did
33 you guys move next?
- 34 JD: So when I was about to turn 13, my mom and her partner at the time and I moved to Boston.
35 Actually to Cambridge, we landed in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That, for me, really turned out
36 to be a blessing – like a huge blessing. My parents had had several custody battles leading up to

- 1 that move. My father had tried to get custody on the grounds that my mom was a lesbian so
2 there had been a lot of turmoil leading up to that move. But we landed in Cambridge and I
3 began high school when I was 13 and that's where I really came out and found a community and
4 that was very significant. The high school I went to is called Cambridge Rindge and Latin School,
5 it's the big public school in Cambridge.
- 6 AJ: Cambridge . . .
- 7 JD: Cambridge Rindge and Latin.
- 8 AJ: Rindge?
- 9 JD: It's R-i-n-d-g-e. Cambridge Rindge and Latin School.
- 10 AJ: OK.
- 11 JD: And it has the oldest gay straight alliance in the country.
- 12 AJ: Is that right?
- 13 JD: It was started by Al Ferrara who was the photography teacher and he began the gay straight
14 alliance after he had . . . he was not out and he had a gay student commit suicide. In 1986,
15 when that happened, he formed the gay straight alliance, so by the time I came along even
16 though it was still high school, which had its difficulties, it was a pretty safe place to be. We had
17 a gay straight alliance office where you could go and sit and read *Dykes to Watch Out For* and
18 whatever else was in there and have gay straight alliance meetings. So when I was 13, I came
19 out as being gay and got really involved with the gay straight alliance, I got involved with a group
20 called Project 10 East that started and sustained gay straight alliances. I did a lot of public
21 speaking and advocacy work all throughout high school – both at my high school and in the
22 larger Boston community. And, I found an amazing art department there. We had theatre, we
23 had dance – I took dance. We had ceramics, drawing, photography. So I really found a
24 community in Boston and I found kind of a safe haven in the art department at my high school.
25 And I was all of a sudden . . . I went from Little Rock where you have to drive everywhere, to
26 Cambridge where I took the bus to school. So it was also a different kind of independence and
27 autonomy. Yeah, from the time I was 13 I was a bit more independent in terms of social groups
28 and much more involved with kind of direct LGBT education.
- 29 AJ: Awesome. I didn't ask – do you have siblings?
- 30 JD: I don't.
- 31 AJ: I mean you didn't mention – and I think in some of the line of your answers, a sibling may have
32 come up but I thought I should just clarify this. So you're an only child.
- 33 JD: I am. My father had two sons from a previous marriage and they lived with us when I was little
34 for four years. When my parents split they went back to live with their mom. One passed away
35 and the other I'm not in touch with. So, I'm really an only child. Technically I have a half-sibling
36 somewhere in the world.

- 1 AJ: Wow. So you found this community, you said you came out as gay so I'm interested in that.
2 What prompted you to use that language and are you referring to gay as an overall designation
3 of alternative sexual orientation or did you recognize yourself as sort of masculine identified and
4 you wanted to be with other men? Is that how you're using gay?
- 5 JD: No. I was using it more as I was attracted to women and female-bodied individuals at the time.
- 6 AJ: So gay as sort of an overarching . . . ?
- 7 JD: Yeah. I identified as a dyke then but I sort of specifically didn't like lesbian.
- 8 AJ: OK. I'm so glad I probed into this a little.
- 9 JD: Yeah.
- 10 AJ: Go ahead – I'm sorry.
- 11 JD: I would sort of . . . so when I was 13 I came out as being attracted to . . . I'm trying to think what
12 I conceived of it then. I guess just other female-identified folks. I was often attracted to
13 masculine of center people, individuals – whether butch or trans or gender variant. The
14 language I would use and other people would use would shift. But then I was 14-ish, I really
15 began questioning my own gender identity and thinking about how that interacted with my
16 sexuality. I settled on the word queer as more of an umbrella term. But earlier on, I liked the
17 word dyke because I felt like it was more political. Somehow it felt like that language left room
18 for me to be masculine in a way that lesbian didn't, even though I wasn't quite at queer yet. So
19 yeah. I'm trying to think of all the good stories to tell. When I was 14 and 15, I was dating
20 someone who was 19 and went to Northeastern and was really involved with the LGBT group
21 there. And all throughout high school I went to a lot of conferences – True Spirit and
22 Transcending Boundaries and the myriad of gay conferences in New England but when I was
23 dating this person I was very involved in that and he was about to transition from female to
24 male. I was friends with his friends and that was . . . they were some of the first trans masculine
25 folks I knew personally but even that felt . . . it didn't feel right. Everyone I met through him was
26 very much female to male binary identified – wanted to transition, wanted to be perceived as
27 male, live as male and to . . .
- 28 AJ: So sexual normative kind of . . .
- 29 JD: Yeah, just a bit more . . .
- 30 AJ: Reinforcement of the binary.
- 31 JD: Yeah. And so even though I was exposed to the trans community, I still didn't quite . . . it didn't
32 feel quite right to me. I knew I was more masculine of center. At that time I think I was even
33 more masculine presenting – I think I've settled into being gentler and . . . I was very pent-up.
34 And then I went to a conference when I was 16 and I saw an art piece someone had made about
35 accessing chest surgery without transitioning and being on hormones. As sort of cliché as it
36 sounds, I had sort of this ah-ha moment where it occurred to me for the first time that I didn't
37 have to take the whole package, that I could kind of pick and choose the parts of masculinity or
38 surgery that felt accurate to me.

- 1 AJ: Sure.
- 2 JD: So yeah, from that moment I pursued having chest surgery but not transitioning hormonally. So
3 I had chest surgery when I was 18 and really, at that point, began to fully settle into my body
4 and settle into feeling comfortable in my skin. I had bound my chest for many years in high
5 school and just never . . . I had a lot of discomfort around dance class and gym class and just
6 anything with my body. What's interesting to me is that I was actually not so uncomfortable
7 with my body when I was alone, or I dated quite a bit in high school and I never had, really,
8 dysphoria with that. But publically and socially I just felt . . . something felt not me about that,
9 and maybe it was that the people I dated definitely treated me as masculine, kind of like re-
10 named that and so I could get past that in a safe way and I feel grateful that I had that
11 experience. But it wasn't until I had chest surgery that I really came into my own self and felt
12 more comfortable. And actually kind of relaxed into the things about me that are more
13 feminine or more . . . these words are so . . . what is feminine? The things that are perceived to
14 be more feminine – more emotional, more vulnerable. Once I felt more at home in my body I
15 felt like I could really express that. I'd say in the past decade I've really become at ease with
16 being more in the middle and more gender variant and really proud of that. There were times
17 right after I had had chest surgery where I was trying to figure out, you know, if I'm in a pool do I
18 have to pass as male? Or if someone sees my chest then do I have to do all these other things
19 that they think men do. It really took a lot of years to kind of unravel all of that and be proud of
20 being female bodied, masculine presenting, having chest surgery but not transitioning. I think
21 I'm at that place now but it took a while to kind of ease into that. It's interesting now because if
22 I'm in a predominantly trans masculine space, I feel very not masculine. I feel like my femininity
23 is magnified and if I'm in a primarily female presenting space, I feel like my masculinity is
24 magnified. So it's kind of this constantly shifting reflection based on who I'm with and how I'm
25 being perceived. And the one thing that made me think of about my childhood is while I was
26 being chased out of bathrooms and being picked on for being masculine, I was actually a fairly
27 sensitive child so there was this kind of complicated dynamic for me where I felt like I couldn't
28 really express that sensitivity because of this other thing going on with my gender.
- 29 AJ: Sure.
- 30 JD: So that's something I think I really also fully came into as an adult, kind of once I had felt at ease
31 with myself.
- 32 AJ: So, you know, I kind of hear what you're saying and I hear a lot of people talk about congruency
33 and it sounds as if you have sort of been able to reconcile holding this sort of middle space.
- 34 JD: Yes.
- 35 AJ: That's amazing. What would you say . . . or what is your friendship circle like? Is there a large
36 community of gender sort-of variant or gender non-conforming people that you're in
37 community with?
- 38 JD: Yeah, I think so. It's different now in my kind of immediate group because I moved so recently.
39 But I would say over the past 10 years I definitely have had community in Boston and Chicago
40 where that was understood and where I had other close friendships with people who were also

1 somewhere in the middle. Yeah. And I also think I have also kind of become comfortable being
2 in that space in the world at large – like with people who are not . . .

3 AJ: Sure.

4 JD: But yeah, I think definitely there is community. If anything . . . there was a period of time when I
5 was maybe 18 to 25 . . . or maybe even younger, maybe 13 to 25, where I was really . . . my kind
6 of primary identity was around being queer or being trans. The thing I was figuring out was my
7 own gender and at some point that shifted and I developed community and friendships around
8 other things as well. And so right now I feel like I am very much a part of a queer community
9 and also a photography community. I make work about gender and sexuality and identity and
10 I've decided my kind of obsessive thing that I make art about is identity and how we each come
11 to know who we are and then how who we are affects relationships with other people and our
12 experience in the world. That's just the thing I keep coming back to. There was a time where
13 the inquiry was focused only on myself and now that time for me has passed and I'm able to
14 engage with other people and more broadly.

15 AJ: And explore identity from that lens, if you will.

16 JD: Yeah.

17 AJ: No pun intended. I know, we met in your capacity as an artist and a photographer, talk to me
18 about your work. What have been some of the major projects that you've worked on and just a
19 little bit more about this exploration of identity and what have you learned beyond your own
20 self exploration – like what are some key learnings that you have experienced from talking to
21 other people about identity?

22 JD: Yeah, that's a big question. So when I was kind of . . . I don't want to say coming out, but when I
23 was going through the process of figuring out where I fit in the world I hadn't seen many visual
24 representations of people who looked like me, or especially whose gender was like mine. And
25 some of the first places that I saw that was in photography books, in books by Catherine Opie
26 and Del LaGrace Volcano. And so as a younger person, as a teenager, I had this . . .

27 AJ: Della Grace?

28 JD: Sorry, Del LaGrace Volcano. I can spell it. Del is an intersex photographer who made a lot of . . .
29 several books about trans and intersex and gender variant folks and I kind of found them in the
30 lesbian/feminist book store which has since closed, unfortunately – like the rest of them. But I
31 had this really powerful experience seeing someone who I, at least, could imagine was like me
32 represented. And so that was part of what fueled my passion for photography. So then I went
33 to college, I went to the Massachusetts College of Art & Design, and kind of took photography
34 right away, just fell in love with it – hit the ground running. And that was also around the time I
35 was having my chest surgery and so as I was learning to be a photographer I was also going
36 through this process around my gender. I photographed that, I made self-portraits. I was part
37 of a trans and gender variant community at the time so I started photographing my friends.
38 That was really the beginning, for me – it's a project I call *Transcendence*. It was my first body of
39 work of trans and gender variant folks. And then over the years I've made other projects that
40 focus on relationships, certain . . . I have one project called *Coupled* that is a collection of

1 portraits of couples who have some connection to a female identity – so I have, you know,
2 female-bodied, lesbian-identified folks, I have trans masculine folks, trans feminine folks, but it
3 was very much about this idea of relationship. As I've gone on as a photographer, my inquiry
4 around gender and identity and sexuality, I feel, as gotten more complicated and deeper. And
5 so in my project, *Every Breath We Drew*, which it just was published . . .

6 AJ: Yes. Thank you for gifting me that.

7 JD: You're welcome. That to me was about a more . . . it was definitely made through a lens of
8 gender and identity and desire and sexuality, but it was more about thinking about that theme I
9 talked about – about how we each come to embody ourselves and how we are able to connect
10 with other people. And also examining masculinity from different angles – so there are folks in
11 the book who are trans identified, folks who are not trans identified, and I was really trying to
12 get at a more broad idea about how these identities are formed. And so now the project that
13 I'm working on that we met for is a project called *To Survive on the Shore: Photographs and*
14 *Interviews with Transgender and Gender Variant Older Adults*. I'm working on that in
15 collaboration with my partner, Vanessa. We're traveling around the country finding people over
16 50 to photograph and interview, and that, for me, is really . . . it's a project that obviously
17 comes from my own interest but it feels like something more external – like I'm not looking into
18 myself and examining who I am. It's more about how can I photograph this part of my
19 community in a way that provides visibility but also captures history and just allows people to
20 have an understanding of what it means to be transgender. I think so much of what we see is
21 youth focused that it seemed important to show a broader spectrum of the community. So
22 yeah, my work has always been about identity but it kind of goes back and forth between me
23 looking internally and then me looking outward, and then me looking internally and then
24 outward. It's definitely informed by who I am but each project kind of takes on a different tone.

25 AJ: Sure, wow. Any key things that you have sort of uncovered along the way? Any sort of threads
26 or . . . ? And if it's a challenge to sort of come up with anything, then don't worry but I just
27 would think sometimes when you train your lens on a person, it brings up some different kinds
28 of information.

29 JD: Yeah. I think one thing that has come to light is the more I think about and focus on and speak
30 to people about gender, the more kind of malleable it seems. I feel like the deeper you look . . .
31 it's kind of like an onion, you keep peeling these layers and you get to the middle of it and
32 there's nothing. I feel that way about masculinity – you keep poking at it and what is this thing?
33 What does it to be masculine? How are the different ways to be masculine? And it all kind of
34 unravels. And so . . . but then, of course, there is that kind of theory side and then there's the
35 real world and how gender is perceived and sexuality is perceived. I've spent a lot of time
36 thinking about the intersection of those things, kind of an internal identity and then the
37 experience of living in the real world and how that manifests. I had another thought and then it
38 just escaped me . . . I mean, I think one thing that really holds true for me in my work is that I
39 think when you really know someone it's hard to hate them, or it's hard to discriminate against
40 them when you really know someone's story and when you see their humanity and you can
41 relate to them. Even though it's in a photograph perhaps or through an interview. I really
42 believe strongly in the power of photography to educate and to create empathy and to allow

1 someone to feel like they know someone that they don't in real life and that they know what
2 someone else has been through. I think that can be really powerful to encourage understanding
3 and encourage dialogue. And the other thing, I think, is for me – I have a lot of self-portraits in
4 my work, whenever I give an artist talk I talk about my own identity and sexuality and whenever
5 I get to Q and A, I tell people they can ask about my work or my gender or whatever. I think
6 when you share yourself in that way it kind of creates space for other people to share. I think if
7 you make yourself vulnerable and try to really be truthful and intimate, I think it allows other
8 people to do that in return and it creates this kind of amazing space where you have this
9 interaction that you wouldn't have otherwise. And that's one thing I love about photography. I
10 like to joke when I speak with students that if I told someone I wanted to come to their house
11 and stare at them for an hour, they would never let me do it but if I say I want to make your
12 photograph it allows for this moment where you really slow down and you try to get to know
13 each other and you look. It facilitates this really meaningful exchange.

14 AJ: Yeah, it really does. It just creates a whole different sort of dynamic. You've really just been
15 going through and sort of answering my questions before I even ask them, which is great.
16 Because yeah, I don't even have to go down that path – I can just sit here and listen to you. I
17 deeply appreciate it. Looking back over your decision to more fully express your true gender
18 identity, what have been some of the challenges?

19 JD: Well, I think it is difficult to kind of live in the world as someone who is more androgynous or
20 gender variant. I had to make peace with the fact that the place I feel most comfortable, for me,
21 is not always something that other people understand, or there's not always an easy space for
22 that in the world. So that is sort of a . . . I don't want to say constant challenge, but I regularly
23 scare people in the restroom or kind of think twice about how to behave in a certain setting –
24 like a gym or a locker room. It's just constantly reflected back at me that people can't quite
25 figure me out. The body scanners at the airport, I almost always have a problem. It's far worse
26 for other people, I recognize that I'm fairly privileged in many ways but it's just kind of a
27 constant reminder of that difference.

28 AJ: So what bathroom do you generally frequent?

29 JD: Well now I use female restrooms. I had used male pronouns and used male restrooms and such
30 for a while. But, that was . . . for me that was always a way to kind of say, "I'm not female in the
31 way you expect," but I never actually internally felt male identified. So as I kind of moved
32 through that kind of becoming at ease with myself, I swung back to feeling like I could use
33 female spaces and present the way that I am – that there was nothing in congruence with the
34 fact that I'm female bodied and that my chest is flat. To me those can go together. Of course,
35 socially . . . if I'm changing in a women's locker room, I will only change my shirt if no one is
36 around. And those are out of respect, I understand people get confused – they get confused
37 kind of by design. I understand. So they are just little ways that I try to be mindful of it like that.
38 Yeah, and then it was interesting having surgery – I had nerve surgery a few weeks ago, just kind
39 of explaining things to the doctors or having them interact with my body is always a little like
40 eh, how is this going to go?

41 AJ: Are they respectful?

- 1 JD: They were pretty respectful. I had one, out of like nine or ten people I encountered, I had one
2 who was uncomfortable.
- 3 AJ: Visibly or expressly?
- 4 JD: Visibly to me and I think this person had perceived me as male and then asked one of the other
5 providers, one of the nurses, something about me using male pronouns and then was corrected
6 and was then flustered and uncomfortable. I mean nothing horrible, it was sort of subtle
7 discomfort. So yeah, that comes up. But I think overall I don't have huge challenges, it's more
8 the kind of subtle social stuff. I have a partner.
- 9 AJ: Yay.
- 10 JD: So I'm not always navigating dating, which can be its own thing.
- 11 AJ: How long have you guys been together?
- 12 JD: We've been together a little over three years.
- 13 AJ: How did you navigate dating prior to this relationship?
- 14 JD: You know, I never had a huge problem finding . . .
- 15 AJ: Rico Suave.
- 16 JD: No, finding people who were queer identified or bi-identified who kind of got my gender. I
17 found that I have often . . . my dating has often worked better with people who were bi- or
18 queer identified, as opposed to very lesbian identified, because there was a little more freedom
19 around me and my body and my expression and that just has always felt the most comfortable.
20 Yeah, I do have . . . I identify sexuality-wise as queer and so my attraction falls along the
21 spectrum . . . I'd say it swings toward . . . I don't even know. It swings toward more female side,
22 whether that's trans masculine, trans feminine, female not trans. But I do have some attraction
23 to more masculine folks and that, to me, felt always not . . . that to me feels more difficult. Like
24 if I had . . . I feel around a lot of more gay male spaces I feel very invisible as a masculine person,
25 I feel very much seen as a female lesbian. So that feels invisible. And I know that's different for
26 trans men who have transitioned, but in terms of more female spaces it's been OK. I've never
27 felt at home in truly lesbian spaces and I've never felt at home in gay male spaces and there
28 aren't really bi-sexual spaces that are designated, at least in my life – maybe at a conference.
29 And so I sometimes miss being in a more queer space where there is a variety of identities and
30 those things are understood, but on a one-to-one level it's been OK. I was also lucky to live in
31 large urban areas where there were communities that were more queer. Yeah.
- 32 AJ: What have been some of the positive aspects?
- 33 JD: Everything. I feel really grateful that the visibility of my gender, from a really young age, kind of
34 forced me out of the closet – and still does. I don't ever pass as not queer or gender
35 conforming, that just doesn't happen. I think even though that was difficult at times, I feel
36 grateful that that kind of forced me to embrace who I am and be comfortable with it and choose
37 to be myself even when there is not an easy space for that to fit. I think that's a real blessing

- 1 because I've known a lot of folks who kind of carry a lot of fear around coming out and kind of
2 fully expressing themselves – for valid reasons.
- 3 AJ: Absolutely.
- 4 JD: I feel grateful that just because of who I am I don't blend easily and because of that I'm just
5 more comfortable and open.
- 6 AJ: Yeah, because you've had a lot more time, based on what you've been sharing with me, a lot
7 more time to really sort of process that in an open and, seemingly, supportive way.
- 8 JD: Yeah.
- 9 AJ: What's your relationship like with your mom and I'm assuming she has a partner.
- 10 JD: Yeah. So my relationship with my mom is great, we're really close. We've always been really
11 close and she's always been a big supporter. She and her partner, Kris, came with me when I
12 had chest surgery.
- 13 AJ: Nice.
- 14 JD: And just have been great – have always been super supportive of me and my gender and
15 sexuality and also just my life and my work. My relationship with my dad is more difficult, it's
16 actually quite tender and sad at the moment. We haven't spoken since the summer when my
17 partner and I got married. So that's been a harder road. He's never really been comfortable
18 with me and my gender, even though we've had a good relationship in other ways at various
19 points. It's just never been easy, it's always been kind of a struggle and I think something that
20 has made him uncomfortable from the time I was a kid until now. So that's difficult but . . . it is
21 what it is. We're kind of working through that at the moment but . . . yeah, but my mom has
22 always been very supportive.
- 23 AJ: Are you connected with extended family?
- 24 JD: Not a lot, I don't have a lot of extended family. My mom's relationship with her mother was
25 severed because she was gay and my father was not . . . when I was growing up his parents lived
26 in Washington state and I saw them a bit, but once my parents got divorced and things kind of
27 shifted, I really didn't see them anymore. So yeah, I have an aunt – my mom has a sister who I
28 know and have a good relationship with, but I don't really have much sense of extended family.
29 And as a kid I didn't grow up with like grandparents that I was close to or aunts and uncles that I
30 was close to, so yeah not much.
- 31 AJ: OK. Chosen family?
- 32 JD: Yeah, I have a lot of chosen family. I do. I think the challenge with me for that is we're all over
33 the country now. People that I have been really close to for a long time, we all have kind of
34 scattered and so I have a lot of really close friends but we're all kind of in different places now
35 and I'm kind of rebuilding my immediate community in St. Louis where I live. But I do feel . . . I
36 like the larger LGBT community and, for me, the larger photography community are both, kind
37 of on a national level, are places where I have a lot of community and people. The upside of my

- 1 community having kind of scattered is I can go to almost any city in the country and know
2 somebody and be kind of tapped into the community there, and that's amazing. But I think as
3 we all increasingly kind of move around and maybe it's just that I know folks in academia or in
4 art careers or something like that. But as we all kind of become more connected on Facebook
5 and less attached to place, it's kind of lost that immediate sense. But yeah.
- 6 AJ: Cool. You just got married, congratulations.
- 7 JD: Thank you.
- 8 AJ: What prompted you to move to St. Louis?
- 9 JD: So . . . Vanessa and I met in Chicago, we met . . . we actually two-stepping at a gay country bar
10 north of here called Charlie's.
- 11 AJ: Charlie's.
- 12 JD: And we met here . . . I was finishing my MFA and she was finishing her Ph.D. in social work and
13 she went on the job market and got a faculty position at Washington University in St. Louis. So
14 we moved for that.
- 15 AJ: For work.
- 16 JD: Yeah, for work and for me, because I'm more flexible, I went and now I focus on my work most
17 of the time, which is really great. I feel very fortunate. And then I also do some freelance
18 museum work locally. So I travel for work and am building up a community . . . yeah,
19 community in St. Louis.
- 20 AJ: So if I can ask, just exploring the medical interventions just a little bit further, you talked about
21 the surgery. Have you considered, have you ever done hormonal therapy or other surgical
22 procedures?
- 23 JD: I had a period of time where I was really thinking if I wanted to pursue any hormones and I
24 ultimately didn't. I never did and I feel that's not something I really question now. So I feel
25 stable with that decision. So no, for me it was only chest surgery. I've never had an inclination
26 to transition medically or socially or have any more surgeries. So I'm kind of at ease in that way.
27 I do seem to keep getting tattoos.
- 28 AJ: OK, that's a form of body modification.
- 29 JD: Slowly getting more tattoos. But no, I feel comfortable with the surgery and I'm not looking into
30 hormones.
- 31 AJ: Thank you for being willing to share and be open about that. You've sort of talked about your
32 personal comfort level in relationship within the L, the G, the B and even sort of the binary T
33 spaces, or trans spaces. What do you think the relationship is on a broader level, how does
34 trans and gender non-conforming people existence relate within the L, the G, and the B
35 community, from your perspective?

1 JD: That's a big question. You know, I think our community is at a tough point around cohesiveness
2 and what we value. I think the needs of the trans community have been ignored in some
3 significant ways by the mainstream, we'll just say G and L, I don't think you can throw B into
4 that. So yeah, I want to be part of a community that is representative of everyone's identity. I
5 feel that there is a split in some of the larger gay and lesbian community versus trans
6 community. I think that . . . I worry that with some of the kind of mainstream acceptance that
7 we've gotten, especially around marriage equality, and even now around kind of mainstream
8 trans narratives, which is sort of a new idea.

9 AJ: Yes, say more about that. After you finish your piece about what you're concerned about, I just
10 want to hear a little bit more of your take about mainstream trans narrative.

11 JD: Well I worry who is being lost in this process and who is being left behind. I think as part of our
12 G and L community moves more into the mainstream and has more mainstream acceptance, I
13 think it becomes less urgent then for those individuals to fight for everyone else. I think that
14 that's a risk that we really have to be thinking about and talking about and remembering that
15 some people do want to assimilate and kind of live the gender conforming heteronormative
16 relationship model and other people don't. I think we have to leave space for people who don't,
17 and can't, and whose gender will never be that and whose relationship models may never be
18 that and whose values may never be that and whose class may never be that. So yeah, I feel like
19 it's a moment where we really need to try to come together and work for kind of larger equality
20 and make more room for people to be who they are and not less – not make it, "Well you can be
21 gay if you have a white picket fence and get married, then that's acceptable." No, we have to
22 really broaden our room for that and that's also my kind of takeaway around loosening our
23 expectations of gender and loosening our stereotypes around gender is that it doesn't just make
24 room for trans folks, it makes room for everyone and all kinds of people who are not part of the
25 trans community are negatively impacted by our gender stereotypes and expectations. So for
26 me it's always been about making room for everyone to be who they are in the space. I hope
27 that we, as a community, can come back to that place. But I'm not . . . I think there's a big shift
28 happening. With the mainstream trans representation, this year has been really fascinating in
29 terms of trans visibility because . . . maybe this year and last, 2015 was kind of held up as the big
30 year, but 2014 we had Laverne Cox and Janet Mock and Chaz Bono if you want to . . .

31 AJ: Chaz was a little prior to that but . . .

32 JD: Yeah, I wasn't blown away but . . . so we've had some visibility but I think 2015, especially with
33 Caitlyn Jenner coming out and with *Transparent* and . . .

34 AJ: Jazz Jennings getting her big reality TV show.

35 JD: Yeah, I think that trans narratives have moved into the mainstream in a way that they never
36 have before. I think that is a really positive development but I also think it's really an important
37 moment for us to think about who is being represented and who has the means and the
38 platform to speak and what issues are being represented. I fear . . . I shouldn't say I fear, I sense
39 that there is some friction between some of the long-time activists in the trans community who
40 have been working for decades to get to this moment and then are not the ones being given the
41 microphone and the platform in this moment. I just really want . . . I want this visibility to

1 extend to people who are not white and upper class and gender conforming. I want it to be a
2 moment where we use this new visibility to tell the stories that we need to tell and make space
3 for our entire community. I think with this incredible visibility and platform comes an incredible
4 responsibility and I don't want Caitlyn Jenner to be the only trans narrative that most of America
5 is familiar with because it's just so misrepresentative of the issues that trans people face. I will
6 be interested to see what happens in the next few years and what kind of narratives get added
7 to the mix and how we can leverage this new visibility and this new understanding to translate
8 into less hate crimes and more access to housing and more access to employment and less
9 harassment, access to health care. All of those things are really critical and I think, in the best
10 case scenario, we would use this moment to advocate for all those very real needs. And in the
11 worst case, everyone will think that the world is great for trans people because Caitlyn Jenner
12 got a cover on *Vogue*. So that's the bad option because that's obviously not the case. It will be
13 interesting to see what kind of comes in the next decade. I do think a lot of social change can
14 start with visibility and can start with understanding, it's just a matter of leveraging that for the
15 right kind of progress.

16 AJ: Absolutely. Have you ever worked for or volunteered with any trans or GNC organizations?

17 JD: I'm trying to think.

18 AJ: I know you talked about your high school experience.

19 JD: Not exclusively – yeah. I think that I had worked with larger LGBT groups. My personal, kind of
20 speaking and advocacy, has been around trans issues and within trans communities. But I have
21 not officially worked for a trans organization.

22 AJ: You did your own thing. Wow. I'm just having a beautiful time sitting here talking to you, Jess.
23 It's fascinating because behind you, actually the moon was beginning to appear and now it just
24 got clouded over again – so I had a little moment there. Has your transgender identity had an
25 impact on your professional life? I think I know the answer to this question but just talk about
26 that a little bit.

27 JD: Yes and no. I think yes in that it has shaped the direction of my work. But no in that I'm . . . I
28 mean, I'm kind of the most . . . well I shouldn't say the most privileged, perhaps actually being
29 trans masculine passing as male would be more so, but I think . . . what am I trying to say? I
30 think it's fairly . . . on the scale of difficulty, it's the easiest to be in my position – to be female
31 bodied, masculine presenting. I think it's generally understood . . . if not understood, it's kind of
32 . . . this is probably the least articulate part of my interview, but I think I feel very lucky to have
33 been able to go to grad school, I've been able to find work, and I feel like it's an incredible
34 privilege and luxury and opportunity to be even trying to pursue a career as an artist. I think
35 that by its nature, it's not a safe career path and therefore I feel privileged to be able to give it a
36 shot. So yeah. I would say yes just in the content of my work and who I am, but no I feel very
37 lucky in that regard. I feel like it's important for me to do what I can to advocate for folks who
38 are not as lucky as me.

- 1 AJ: So I would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge that we're in Chicago because of the National
2 Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgender Task Force Conference called Creating Change. What has
3 been the highlight of your conference so far?
- 4 JD: Well, I think it's been amazing just to be around so many people who are committed to social
5 justice and activism. In my daily life I . . . what am I trying to say? I believe so strongly that
6 activism is important and can change the world and I believe that my work is important in that
7 way and I believe that other kinds of direct activism are really important, but I think sometimes
8 it gets hard to kind of sustain that . . . what am I trying to say? I was at a moment where I kind
9 of needed to re-fuel a little bit. I feel like I've been putting a lot out there and . . .
- 10 AJ: Sustain that passion.
- 11 JD: Yeah, and just kind of reconnect with community. And so, for me, that's been the most
12 powerful – just to really be tapped into community and be deeply reminded of how important it
13 is to keep pursuing change and working for that. And also in terms of the project I'm working
14 on, it's been amazing because there are several people here who I had photographed that I
15 didn't know were coming, so I got to see them. And then I've reconnected with people like you,
16 who I had photographed but now photographed again and get to spend more time with.
- 17 AJ: Yay.
- 18 JD: And also I've just met lots of new folks who I hope to include in the project. So yeah, it's just
19 been really inspiring and kind of like a community re-charge moment for me, which has been
20 nice.
- 21 AJ: Fifty years from now what is the state of the transgender, non-conforming community?
- 22 JD: Wow, 50 years. It's hard to even quantify because I think I see . . . I see change coming so
23 quickly in some ways. And also looking backwards, I see how much progress we've made. We
24 had an exercise in the workshop I was in yesterday. At the end – the workshop was all about
25 elder LGBT communities and building ally ship and story-telling, and we had an exercise at the
26 end to call someone up and thank them for something or tell them something we appreciate.
27 And Jude Patton, who I had photographed, who is 75 – he transitioned 40 years ago. He was in
28 the workshop and so I called him up and started to thank him for welcoming me into his home
29 and sharing his story with me and I couldn't even keep it together. I just started crying. Really
30 what I wanted to thank him for, which I barely squeaked out between tears, was paving the
31 road for me to be this person. I think there were a lot of people, like Jude, who came before me
32 who made it even safe for me to come out in high school and identify as gender variant and
33 have a community. And then the flipside is, when I go to universities and I speak to 19-year-old
34 students, their understanding of gender is so much further along than mine was and they're
35 making space for things in a whole new way. I recognize that that's just in this academic bubble,
36 but yeah I think I can already see in a decade how much progress has been made. I hope we can
37 get to a point where people are free to express their gender in whatever way feels authentic
38 without that having any negative affect on their life or employment or safety or access to health
39 care or any of these things – which I think now, obviously, still does in a kind of profound way
40 for a lot of folks. So yeah, I would love to be in a place where everyone could be themselves and

1 where we keep working toward . . . I mean, if we want to go down that rabbit hole, we also have
2 to talk about race equality and class equality and all of these other factors that intersect so
3 strongly with our community. But I would just love to just be in a place where everybody had
4 what they needed and could be who they are and could live happily – no matter what their
5 gender is or where they come from.

6 AJ: Jess, it's been a fascinating hour and 10 minutes talking to you. Thank you so much for this
7 opportunity and for your willingness and our generosity. Peace.

8 JD: You're welcome. Thanks for talking to me.