

Roze (R.B.) Brooks  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

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

November 3, 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 Roze (R.B.) Brooks -RB  
3  
4
- 5 AJ: Hello.
- 6 RB: What's up?
- 7 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project  
8 at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. Today is November 3, 2016, and I am  
9 here on this gorgeous fall day in Duluth, Minnesota, and I'm here with Roze (R.B.) Brooks. How  
10 are you today, Roze?
- 11 RB: Doing quite all right.
- 12 AJ: Yeah.
- 13 RB: Yes.
- 14 AJ: Awesome,awesome. Can you state your name and how you spell it so we make sure we have  
15 the spelling right? And, the name that you would prefer me to use in this conversation, the  
16 gender pronouns that you use, your gender assigned at birth, and your gender that you identify  
17 today.
- 18 RB: Sure. All easy, right? So, yeah – Roze Brooks, Roze or R.B. Roze, R-o-z-e – Rose with a z. R.B.,  
19 the initials – both are fine, I don't really have a preference on either. They/them pronouns. I  
20 was assigned, unconsensually right, female at birth, and I currently identify as gender queer and  
21 non-binary.
- 22 AJ: Wow, that's awesome. So, can you just tell me what is your earliest memory? What's the first  
23 thing you remember in life?
- 24 RB: Like at all?
- 25 AJ: Yeah, your first memory. It doesn't have to be around gender but if it is, that's cool.
- 26 RB: Wow. I don't know, I guess I'm fortunate to remember back to being a child so lots of back yard  
27 time with pets. I don't know why when you said that I popped up with apple picking in St. Louis  
28 or more of the rural areas of St. Louis. There's a lot of orchards in St. Louis for some reason that  
29 clicked too, so apple picking was a thing.
- 30 AJ: Apple picking, that's pretty cool – that's a fun thing for kids to do.
- 31 RB: Yeah.
- 32 AJ: I don't think I went apple picking as a child. I've done it with my children many times but I  
33 would imagine it's a very memorable experience as a very young child.
- 34 RB: I guess, that's what popped up.
- 35 AJ: So you grew up in St. Louis – St. Louis, Missouri.

- 1 RB: Yes.
- 2 AJ: What was that like, beyond the apple orchards?
- 3 RB: It was interesting and I feel like not being in St. Louis now, like I don't really knew that I  
4 understood what it meant to live in a very urban epicenter – like living kind of on the precipice  
5 of the city but not quite the city, not really having a lot of opportunity to really explore the city  
6 because of stigma that was hanging out at home. So like looking at it now, I really just kind of  
7 didn't really get to explore the city and really understand what the city meant. I didn't really  
8 understand all the problems and nuances that were going on in the city. But, because of a lot of  
9 that, because of parameters put in place it was fine, it was safe, it was comfortable. I did the  
10 high school thing, did the hanging out with friends thing and there was never really . . . I was  
11 comfortable, so it was fine except for not being in the greatest home environment as I started to  
12 understand other things – but St. Louis is great.
- 13 AJ: St. Louis is great.
- 14 RB: Yeah.
- 15 AJ: So you kind of alluded to school being pretty cool, at least better than your home environment.  
16 So you had friends?
- 17 RB: Yes.
- 18 AJ: Were you queer identified in school?
- 19 RB: It was a work in progress. I was a choir kid and a theatre kid so that, I feel, is a troke for some  
20 reason for queer folk but I spent a lot of time, extra time, in high school especially, extra time  
21 after school doing theatre stuff and choir stuff and that's where all the queer kids kind of  
22 congregating. I don't know that all of us knew it at the time or what was going on at the time,  
23 but a lot of those folks that I was closest to, we all realized it eventually – some shade of queer,  
24 yeah.
- 25 AJ: That is interesting. That's good though because, I mean, I know a lot of people who identify as  
26 trans and/or queer or gay or lesbian get teased in school or bullied in school and that was not  
27 your experience.
- 28 RB: Not really. I feel that because I was so particular about the spaces I was in that it wasn't an  
29 issue.
- 30 AJ: So you curated your own safe space.
- 31 RB: I'd seen it, I witnessed it for other folks but even those folks, not to diminish it, but it really  
32 wasn't too chronic of a thing. There was the occasional instance with your trophy masculine  
33 humans that had qualms with it, especially with the gay men in high school. But it wasn't  
34 ridiculous, I'd say, compared to what I know is the reality for a lot of folks.
- 35 AJ: So you were out in high school?
- 36 RB: A little bit – yeah, it didn't feel like an out thing. I know that I came out to myself and one other  
37 friend when I was like 15, because it was my first permission slip, I guess, into really

1 understanding some sexuality stuff – the gender stuff was a long time coming at that point, but  
2 the sexuality stuff was a conversation. But it didn't mean anything in high school, there really  
3 wasn't a lot of exploring on that or felt the need to because I was just comfortable and I had my  
4 choir folk and my theatre folk and everything was just comfortable.

5 AJ: Right. So, tell me about your home life.

6 RB: Yeah, that was a hot mess. I have two younger brothers, they're twins – they're four years  
7 younger than me, so I was technically the oldest in the house because I have an older half-  
8 brother who is 18 years older so really by the time that I was a conscious child, he was pretty  
9 much out of the house. We're a dysfunctional family, which 90% of people probably say their  
10 family is dysfunctional, but it just wasn't great. Mom is super anti-everything . . . anti-gay, anti-  
11 people of color, anti-everything and very paranoid about the world which is why I didn't really  
12 get to explore the city a whole lot because bad things would happen if I went certain places. So  
13 it was just really restrictive. Dad's always been fine, but there's always been turbulence  
14 between the two of them, so just a lot of not getting to explore enough relationships with  
15 extended family either. So really fast forward all through that, there was a reason I jetted clear  
16 across the state to go to school in Kansas City when I was able to, I ducked out as soon as I could  
17 because it wasn't great. I just didn't really get to do anything, "No" was a very common answer  
18 for just trying to live and do cool things and it was just always, "No, you can't do that." "Why?"  
19 No answer. Just, "No, you can't."

20 AJ: But there was no harassment or bullying or physical sort of . . . violence?

21 RB: Yes and no. I think there was this veil of denial that there was any possible queerness going on,  
22 like even throughout high school because I didn't spend a lot of time at home anyway. I think  
23 my parents spent a lot of time bringing up my two younger brothers. I was a good child as far as  
24 they were concerned so they didn't really have to spend a lot of time attending to me so I kind  
25 of . . . my high school was literally like walking distance, you could hear it and see it from my  
26 house. So if I was at school they knew I was in proximity so I could do whatever I wanted at  
27 school because they knew where I was, so that was never an issue. So me spending all that time  
28 was never a concern, but I don't know . . . just weird stuff, like lots of just verbal disputes. My  
29 dad would get really worked up and it was always something petty and something silly and my  
30 mom was really stellar at bringing up whatever year at the time – like years' worth of just simple  
31 things, like family stuff and it was just never necessary. But there was verbal stuff. I don't really  
32 know, I never really unpacked a lot of that – it's a long time ago. Let's just say it wasn't great, it  
33 wasn't healthy I don't feel like either.

34 AJ: What was your relationship like with the twins?

35 RB: I kind of did my own thing and so did they, that's still kind of the case now. We don't have a bad  
36 relationship, we just . . . they're not very social people. One of them is a big video gamer, hung  
37 out in the basement all the time; the other one was never home either. So we just kind of  
38 learned . . . I think that was what it bread us out of though, that house wasn't one where there  
39 was a lot of communication happening so we just kind of, by default, just kind of did our own  
40 thing and found our own friend groups and kept to our own because that was the best method.  
41 Because if we talked about what we were doing we'd get criticized, even if it was something

1 simple, or if we were doing something that might be deemed a problem, then all hell would  
2 break loose in the house and then the parents would go at it again because it would be one of  
3 their faults. I don't know. It was just a lot of cyclical . . . we just kept to our own because that  
4 was the best way to do it.

5 AJ: When did you realize that you might be, or that you felt like, that you're a gender different from  
6 the one you were assigned at birth?

7 RB: Now that I'm at this point now where I very definitively identify as I do, I look back and I think of  
8 some really funny instances where it might have been a thing that I should have noticed at the  
9 time, but really the tipping point was the summer between graduating from college and starting  
10 grad school because I didn't get control over coming out in terms of my general queerness  
11 sexuality-wise. My mom took it upon herself to figure out how to use Google, and she is not a  
12 tech savvy person so this being her first adventure in Google was not good for me because  
13 Googling basically just my name and found all of this stuff I'd already been affiliated with – like  
14 conferences I'd been part of planning and interviews I'd done for radio stations . . . all of my  
15 journalism stuff which was very queer focused. So I didn't really get control over that and I  
16 remember being in Kansas City and getting a text message, "Ask me about tattoos." And I'm  
17 like, "What are you talking about?"

18 AJ: I was going to ask you about your tattoos too – so me and mom we're on the same page in a  
19 way. I don't know.

20 RB: Right. She messages me about, "Did you get a tattoo?" And I'm looking at myself and I've got  
21 13 of them and I'm like, "Which one?" Tattoos were not a safe conversation necessarily either.  
22 She didn't oppose of them but she had very specific ideas of what I should be getting so me  
23 getting something that wasn't on the approved list would have been a problem. I don't even  
24 know how to deal with this so I left it alone, put the phone down for a bit, and came back and it  
25 was just an explosion of all caps, broken English text messages of just going off on all this stuff  
26 she'd found and I'm like, "I don't know what to do with this." I didn't know even what she had  
27 found because of the power of Google. There's so many things . . . all of my social media.  
28 Nothing that I would have had a qualm with but I knew that this was the worst possible thing for  
29 her. So, because of all of that I was like, "Well, my closet door just got blown off the hinges so  
30 let me just start messing around with everything else." So that was probably the first time I was  
31 ever able to really be introspective and have a conversation with myself of like, "Well, now I'm  
32 free to do whatever." And there had been a lot of instances, because I was fortunate to have  
33 lots of queer higher ed spaces that I was able to go to throughout college, like conferences and  
34 summits and stuff and there was always usually caucuses that were specifically for certain  
35 identities. I always wanted to go to the trans one but I was like, "I don't feel like I'm supposed  
36 to be there yet, I feel really comfortable in the bi-sexuality ones and the fluid ones so I'm going  
37 to keep going to this because I can have this conversation." But I always regretted not going to  
38 the trans ones just to even test the waters to see if that felt right. So there was a leadership  
39 academy that I went to that summer after all the mayhem with mom, that I still didn't go to but  
40 I talked to folks that had and a really close friend of mine . . .

41 AJ: You didn't go . . . you didn't go to the leadership academy.

- 1 RB: Well I went to the academy but we had a caucus space also for trans folks.
- 2 AJ: Oh, you didn't go to the trans thing.
- 3 RB: And I still didn't go but I was toying with alternating pronouns, right? I had started asking for  
4 either the gendered pronouns I was using at the time or they/them and so I was . . . this is me  
5 weaseling in a little bit to see what this feels like. I still didn't go to any of the trans spaces at  
6 the summer academy but had folks that had gone to those spaces or folks that I was getting  
7 gradually closer with – there was something to this. There really wasn't a moment but at least  
8 that summer I was just like well, all bets are off so let me just start toying around and testing  
9 everything and see what fits and this is where I've currently landed. I was joking with a friend  
10 super recently and I was like, "I was a tenor in choir several times," like I was allowed to be that  
11 and it was the best feeling in the world of being a tenor because I was a super low alto and any  
12 time we didn't have enough tenors I got to be one and I was like, "That should have been . . ." I  
13 was mid-phone call with him and I just stopped and he's like, "Where did you go?" I'm like, "I'm  
14 just having a moment because that's really funny." He just laughed at me.
- 15 AJ: Wow. Yeah, I mean sometimes trans identity you get that affirmation wherever you can, right?  
16 But, your story sort of, at least that part of it, sort of defies the myth that people knew when  
17 they were 4-years-old and everybody always called them a little boy when they were only six.  
18 That's not your story. What's the importance of really, in your mind, being able to hear a wide  
19 range of identities and how people come to those identities? Because it sounds like you may  
20 have come to these realizations through more of a socialization process.
- 21 RB: Yeah, and that's where I was headed in my thought to kind of how to even kind of unpack that –  
22 the importance of having those abundance and diversity of stories, right? I didn't know . . . I  
23 knew a lot of gay and lesbian folks in high school because that was . . . 10 or 11 years ago, we  
24 didn't have a whole lot of language. Like even when I was 15, bi-sexual was the first word I  
25 encountered that felt the most relative and now I'm quite a few years removed from that – that  
26 was my permission slip into it. So I didn't know any trans folk at the time, I didn't even know  
27 what that meant – I didn't know what a lot of that entailed. So had I had stories or access to  
28 some of that, had I had Tumblr when I was 15-years-old, quite frankly, a lot of that would have  
29 changed because I would have seen different experiences and I think some of it might have  
30 clicked – maybe, maybe it would have clicked sooner or I would have gone on a different  
31 journey in a different way sooner than having to have to happen at a very traumatic time of  
32 having that outing process happen and then me just saying, "Well, let me just mess around with  
33 everything else in the process." I think it would have helped.
- 34 AJ: Wow. So what's your relationship like with your family now?
- 35 RB: I'm still a hot mess. I have cut . . . well, it wasn't just me, it was a pretty mutual process of  
36 cutting all ties with my mom. I don't even usually call her mom but I felt like it would be  
37 awkward if I started calling her maternal birth giver during this, but that's usually how I refer to  
38 her. Me and my dad are fine. It was weird at first and we don't really talk a lot about much. He  
39 doesn't actually know the extent of the trans stuff, but as far as me living my life, he's super  
40 supportive of that and is really proud of everything I've done so far. I'm the first in our family to  
41 get a higher ed degree of any kind.

- 1 AJ: OK, that's awesome. Congratulations.
- 2 RB: So he's like, "I don't know why she's so pissed off at you about all the rest of this, you are the  
3 first in the family to do all of this amazing stuff." He's looking past . . .
- 4 AJ: So dad's bringing the love.
- 5 RB: Dad is great. Dad's fine and that's always been the case so I don't think that I was necessarily  
6 surprised about that, but I just wish that I had had control over the conversation because I don't  
7 even know what they think they know because we've never talked about it. My brothers and I  
8 chit-chat on occasion, usually they're messaging me about how do I do a FAFSA and how do I do  
9 this other stuff.
- 10 AJ: Because you have a degree in higher ed.
- 11 RB: Right. Well because I was the first one to do it too, so they're like, "I don't know how to do  
12 this." My parents aren't really super useful at assisting in some of that either because they  
13 don't know what that means. One of my brothers just started attending school though at a very  
14 conservative institution in Tennessee that's on the list of schools that have filed for Title IX  
15 exemptions so it was really hard for me to try to figure out how to have a conversation with him  
16 about how that impacts me as a person without really having to divulge and talk too much  
17 about me in that.
- 18 AJ: Right.
- 19 RB: And wanting to support him to go to school because his concern is baseball, he doesn't care  
20 about it being a faith-based institution, he just wants to play baseball and someone offered him  
21 a spot and so there he went. But I'm like, "I need you to know, that this is a thing that has  
22 possible severe consequences for people."
- 23 AJ: Wow. There's always these sort of these conundrums that we face in life because yeah, you  
24 want to be supportive of him, of course, but there are still these values that we have.
- 25 RB: And I never expected that to be a conversation because I'm like, "You're going where? To do  
26 what?" And he's studying criminal justice and I'm like . . . this is a space where I don't know  
27 what that's going to look like that's going to have very interesting perspectives . . .
- 28 AJ: Wow, you've got to talk to this young man, Roze.
- 29 RB: Right. I tried, I did. I don't want to . . . I don't know.
- 30 AJ: What school is this?
- 31 RB: What is it even called? Freed-Hardeman University in I don't know where Tennessee.
- 32 AJ: Wow, OK.
- 33 RB: I did some research because I was like, "I've never heard of this." Very small, very conservative.  
34 I'm like this is the antithesis of what I do, but this is family and so I'm like how do I support him  
35 in doing something he's been working toward to play baseball, but it also has like a huge impact  
36 on . . .



- 1 AJ: Just tell him to don't join the fraternity called KKK.
- 2 RB: I think he's conscious enough for that one, I think it was just trying to dive into some of the  
3 more nuanced stuff – like, "This could be an issue, I want you to think very seriously." I've at  
4 least given him the motive to just ask questions and be critical of what you're learning in class  
5 because that's the last thing I need is for you to come out with a criminal justice degree and  
6 think that marginalized folks are the enemy in that. So that one has been hard.
- 7 AJ: So, what challenges have you faced beyond your brother being a sort of far-right Christian?
- 8 RB: Which is weird, because he's not.
- 9 AJ: Law enforcement aspire-e. Let's hope the baseball thing works out and at least he won't be  
10 pulling people over for broken headlights. What challenges have you faced since you have been  
11 more out? At least . . . because it sounds like you're not very out around your gender identity to  
12 your folks even though you don't see your mom at all.
- 13 RB: Not to family of origin, no. I would say with chosen family and friends especially – like right out  
14 of the gate after undergrad. It didn't really feel like it required this announcement process, it  
15 just kind of happened and then the pronoun thing happened. Some of them took to it fine and  
16 some were like, "Well, this is weird," and then an adjustment. But I think the challenge has just  
17 been really figuring out who I'm going to continue to invest my energy in. Starting grad school,  
18 because of having all the turbulence with the origin family stuff and wanting to hang on to the  
19 important people from undergrad, I was really reluctant to try to invest in new relationships  
20 with folks in grad school and then also felt like I was playing educator in the classroom in not the  
21 way that I was hired on to do so – not knowing if folks were asking me questions because of my  
22 identities or if folks were asking me because I was technically the expert person who was doing  
23 LGBT work on campus – which is still a thing that I feel like I have to navigate of figuring out how  
24 much intellectual and emotional labor I'm willing to pour into if folks are asking out of curiosity  
25 or if they're asking because they want to do self-work.
- 26 AJ: Wow. You speak and your thought process is like that of an activist in some ways.
- 27 RB: Yeah.
- 28 AJ: And as a journalist, what . . . do you consider yourself a trans politic advocate?
- 29 RB: For sure. Yeah, and trying to get to an understanding of that when I'm situated in higher ed has  
30 been its own challenge too because I was always that person who is like, "I'm never going to  
31 have anything to do with politics." And then when I realized how important and literally life-  
32 altering it would be to have to invest in understanding how politics impact identities, I was like,  
33 "Well, I guess I can't actually just ignore politics." I think watching a lot of that stuff play out in  
34 higher education and knowing what my experiences was and are in higher education, has really  
35 prompted a lot of push also because I've been doing LGBT advocacy work, at minimum, and now  
36 that I understand what the difference would have been for me but in undergrad it was planning  
37 programs and doing the awareness stuff and thinking that was the gamut and then I went to  
38 grad school and got angrier than I thought I already was, and then just became the loud person  
39 and I'm like, "I'm OK with this." I didn't ever think I was going to be that person who spoke up

1 at every given moment in class but I'm like I don't care anymore, I don't care about folks  
2 comfort and once I understood the very important difference between comfort and safety and  
3 knowing I wasn't safe, I didn't care about making people uncomfortable if it meant that they  
4 learned or that they were interrupted in their problematic behavior. But it was two years of  
5 grad school of doing that, but then trying to figure out how to channel anger into some  
6 productive means of advocacy in a way that was going to be effective. So I spent two years, at  
7 least, of grad school being super transparent with students about how much agency they  
8 actually have and trying to motivate them to do things but also trying to motivate  
9 administrators and folks who are in some kind of higher ed capacity to not just wait until the  
10 students do it because it's not technically their job – but then not always heeding my own  
11 advice and being a student in that capacity and doing a lot of the work. So, I'd like to do more  
12 outside of the higher ed scheme but I feel like that's been everywhere that I've had to pour  
13 because especially doing this work in Kansas and having the identities I had in Kansas every day  
14 was a, "Well, what mess am I going to run into today, what fire do I have to put out today?" and  
15 knowing I was the only trans person in not just my office but pretty much the entire campus at  
16 some kind of staff level as far as I knew – openly. And without a doubt I'm the first openly trans  
17 person to go through my higher ed program, that I was the guinea pig in a lot of ways. And so  
18 kind of being the guinea pig I was the voice whether I liked it or not.

19 AJ: I will be glad when there are no more firsts for trans people, right?

20 RB: Right, it's not an accolade anymore – not really, no.

21 AJ: It's like we need to be moved . . . we need to, as a society, move beyond that except it would be  
22 cool to have the first trans woman of color president.

23 RB: Oh for sure.

24 AJ: That would be so amazing.

25 RB: I'd vote on that ticket immediately.

26 AJ: Wow, so to the extent that you feel comfortable, Roze, have there been any medical  
27 interventions related to your transition?

28 RB: No. That's been a lot of internal conversations and just trying to figure out what that means. I  
29 think what's been stressful, just trying to co-exist in some trans space, is that that seems to be  
30 the priority of conversation in a lot of spaces too, right? And so really just trying to detach  
31 myself from it and have a conversation with myself about what's important and what that  
32 means just because I feel like whether it's peer-to-peer group conversations or Facebook  
33 groups, I'm in a lot of Facebook groups, that the bulk of conversation is folks passing resources  
34 or having conversations about how to do certain elected procedures for things and I'm like, "Can  
35 we talk about something really conceptual and existential and academic?" That's what I want to  
36 talk about. So just trying to find that outlet, recognizing the need for those resources and those  
37 conversations for folks that want to go that trajectory, which not really having committed and  
38 understood what that means for me, but I just want to talk about gender because that's fun to  
39 me. I just want to talk about it.

- 1 AJ: OK, talk about gender. Tell me about gender – I want to hear about gender from RB's  
2 perspective.
- 3 RB: Just deep, interesting, intellectual conversations, which sounds pompous and ridiculous but . . .
- 4 AJ: No, I think gender is like this thing that is being hotly debated and rapidly sort of moving in very,  
5 very uncharted directions in terms of this current society's recognition of it.
- 6 RB: And everybody has suddenly become an expert on gender, right?
- 7 AJ: Right.
- 8 RB: With the bathroom debate crap and especially in higher ed – that's been a biggie. Title IX stuff  
9 and how to accommodate for trans students and you've got organizations of every variety  
10 speaking on it and you've got really problematic folks that are speaking on college campuses  
11 about it, right? But everybody has suddenly become an expert on gender, but they're not. Like  
12 the folks that are getting the air time are typically the folks that are the least versed and the  
13 least competent on really the complexities of gender.
- 14 AJ: Like who? Are you speaking of someone specifically?
- 15 RB: Which example? Politicians, for one – politicians for the most part . . . I can't really even think of  
16 anybody off the top of my head that have any room really talking about gender things policy-  
17 wise. And we're not seeing the bright voices that are being wedged into these spaces to have  
18 public conversations and really contribute to the rhetoric because they get pushed aside. So it's  
19 just been frustrating to watch and I think there's just a lot of pressure in some ways because of  
20 the national rhetoric or folks that are creating policies are supposed to be inclusive and  
21 accommodating for trans folks but they're missing . . . they're still very much from a binary  
22 place.
- 23 AJ: Right.
- 24 RB: And so for folks that don't co-exist in that, trying to figure out where we fall and feeling like the  
25 debris that is falling through the cracks of these policies that are trying to be written or these  
26 conversations that are being had or these organizations that are being crafted. It just gets  
27 stressful when, for some reason, the conversation always seems to dwindle down to biology and  
28 me and biology are not friends – not at all, so just that being the root of the conversation that's  
29 where I just get really fed up. Can we just talk about something . . . I don't know, else?
- 30 AJ: So you have no desire to necessarily physically transition but more of a social spiritual  
31 transition?
- 32 RB: I don't know if I don't have the desire.
- 33 AJ: And I don't even know why I threw spiritual on there but actually it is sort of a spiritual  
34 transition, it can be.
- 35 RB: Right, yes. I don't know, I think that journey is still a-coming. I don't really know and I just,  
36 again, haven't really had that conversation with myself and trying to navigate the pressure that  
37 can come with certain . . . like with queer and trans spaces of that being, that being the root of

- 1 every time we talk about trans folks it's about biology. So in some way I think I'm being  
2 stubborn and trying to distance myself from that conversation so that I can have it with myself  
3 instead of feeling like, "Well, if I'm surrounded by everyone else who is on T or hormones or  
4 doing everything else, well I guess I'll just do it too." I don't want that to be how my decision  
5 comes, "Because it's what everyone else is doing." To kind of have that conversation with  
6 myself before I decide what that even means or looks like. So I don't know – to be decided.
- 7 AJ: What is your status here at the University of Minnesota-Duluth?
- 8 RB: What do you mean by status?
- 9 AJ: Well, you referred to it earlier – you said, "my status" in academia. So what's your job? What  
10 do you do?
- 11 RB: What do I do – yeah, that thing. On paper I am the GLBT Services Program Coordinator. So I'm  
12 a party of one in a larger office of Diversity and Inclusion but the only person in my unit doing  
13 queer work.
- 14 AJ: Is that a part of the Twin Cities campus OED? Is there some connection at all?
- 15 RB: Nope.
- 16 AJ: OK.
- 17 RB: There's not.
- 18 AJ: So each school has their own office of equity and diversity.
- 19 RB: Well our two campuses do, I don't know about the other campuses in our system and a lot of . . .  
20 I feel like there's quite a few institutions nationally that don't even have a diversity office let  
21 alone a full-time person doing diversity work. So, yeah – ours do.
- 22 AJ: And then even fewer that have an LGBT Center?
- 23 RB: Yes, correct. Hit or miss for sure.
- 24 AJ: So that's huge. You're the Director of the LGBT office here at Duluth and advocating around  
25 gender. I imagine you're out on campus. What's it like navigating that space as an out trans  
26 person?
- 27 RB: It's taxing work in general and I don't know that it would be drastically different at any  
28 institution. I mean I think that the climate here is set up in a way that I can more seamlessly  
29 exist, and even if I'm a new being of existence for some folks, they're trying to navigate what it  
30 means to be in solidarity or at least be an ally, whatever that word means for them, to trans  
31 folk. I think there's stuff set-up to where it was much more accommodating in many ways for  
32 me to show up here and start doing this work, especially in comparison to having come from  
33 Kansas most recently because at Kansas it was . . . there was no seamlessness to it, there was . . .  
34 . I did not come out of that program or the work that I was doing unscathed down there. So to  
35 come here, it's very much . . .
- 36 AJ: And this was at the University of Kansas?

- 1 RB: Yeah. So being here in comparison has been a breath of fresh air, like there is still work to do –  
2 there's always going to be work to do, but I feel like I've been able to kind of merge into this a  
3 lot better. I think . . . I feel like the general tone of campus, there's been a pretty hearty focus  
4 on the G and the L and those folks are doing OK for the most part and those conversations have  
5 been had and those programs are in place so I'm like, "Well, cool, now I'm going to . . ."
- 6 AJ: Can we shift our focus a little bit?
- 7 RB: . . . do some additional stuff here. I remember we had our national coming out day luncheon a  
8 couple weeks ago and we hung up a rainbow flag and a trans flag and most of the conversation  
9 up to the point before I was asked to come and do a quick little, "Hey, hi and hello," was talking  
10 about combatting homophobia and I was like, "You're missing something very important here."  
11 So when I got up I winged it and I was like, "Yeah, in addition to homophobia you really need to  
12 tackle trans phobia and sexism, that's a really big thing that you can't just do part of it, you have  
13 to do all of it."
- 14 AJ: Well maybe because homophobia is actually really rooted in trans phobia because the people  
15 who are harassed are typically people who are either effeminate or masculine or somehow  
16 shifting the gender norms, it's not necessarily about who people sleep with. At any rate . . .
- 17 RB: Absolutely. So like that's where I feel folks are kind of at. They understand the sheer notion for  
18 gay and lesbian folk at minimum is a perpetual struggle and something that needs to be  
19 considered in creating more inclusive environments on campus but I feel like so far it's kind of  
20 been . . . and also trans people and also trans folk and just kind of a gentle little reminder or  
21 add-on to the conversations that are happening, which is of no fault necessarily because of  
22 bureaucracy in higher ed, that's where I feel like the entire field is at but just kind of having to  
23 be that person who is just constantly having to set the reminder or my sheer existence in the  
24 space being the reminder and then folks kind of having to squirm and having to figure out how  
25 they adjust their language accordingly. That's been kind of a thing I've had to deal with, not  
26 specifically at my institution but just kind of . . .
- 27 AJ: Generally, broadly.
- 28 RB: Having conversations with folks in higher ed in general, whether it's social media or whatever,  
29 it's like just constantly having to play educator in the spaces where I'm trying to be just a  
30 participant and trying to learn too. I'm only 25, I've got a ways to go on the self-work scale but  
31 feeling like I always have to be the constant little extra voice of, "And also, did you forget  
32 this? Can we add this? Can we also do this?" Which I don't mind doing but it can be taxing.
- 33 AJ: It's work – it's work, yeah. It absolutely is work. What have been some of the joys of sort of  
34 being closer or at least on the journey towards self, I think you referred to it as?
- 35 RB: That's a really great question. I don't know, I guess I'm that person who doesn't take stock of  
36 that a lot so let's see here.
- 37 AJ: I'm asking you to take stock right now.
- 38 RB: I know. Why? Damn . . . I don't know. I realize it's a journey of self but I feel like just the  
39 people, like again the people that I've learned to invest more in has been very rewarding for me

1 and really important for me of finding people that uplift me in ways that I never had and to  
2 really kind of support me through kind of all the trenches of even trying to figure out what this  
3 even means or what it looks like. I've had really stellar relationships with folks that, if I wasn't  
4 really participating in this or figuring this out on my own, I don't know that we ever would have  
5 even collided at any point and they're some of my dearest and closest people that are also kind  
6 of exploring the journey too. So it's like we've wandered into this foggy, hazy place where we  
7 don't know where we're going and just happen to bump into each other and it's like, "OK, let's  
8 keep walking together."

9 AJ: Wow.

10 RB: It's been really . . . I think that's been super empowering too to have folks . . . I really gravitate  
11 towards folks who I would say are kind of living through the struggle too. That helps me  
12 immensely to know that I'm not the only one – as cheesy as that kind of sounds. But it's just  
13 been helpful and I think there's just kind of this good reciprocity of energy that happens when I  
14 encounter folks that are trying to grapple with some of the same stuff, even if it's not the exact  
15 same and we're at very different places in that process or that journey. It's just kind of a I see  
16 you, you see me, we don't even have to talk about but we know – it's just this unspoken  
17 knowing that's just really encouraging even though I'm currently nine hours away from some of  
18 those people, I still get that. That's still a thing, that's not going to go away.

19 AJ: Yeah, it's kind of funny – it's sort of a metaphor that you moved to Duluth, Minnesota, because  
20 it gets kind of foggy up here in the mornings and even late at night being in the harbor and  
21 everything, and you said you walked into this sort of foggy existence. But, things clear up – the  
22 sun comes out and you can see a little more clearly.

23 RB: Yes.

24 AJ: Talk to me about love and romance and relationships. How has your trans identity impacted  
25 your love life? And even more broadly, your sexuality.

26 RB: Sure. Um . . . I mean it's not been like easy, I would say. I think being, like I said, kind of mindful  
27 about who I'm investing energy in and trying to navigate what that looks like. What the  
28 difference between investing platonically into a relationship is for like friendship or just a  
29 situationship versus what pursuing a possible relationship looks like, I don't know that that line  
30 exists anymore because I just pour so fully into my relationships because they're so few and far  
31 between now and I'm very much . . . I'm so selective and important about who I surround myself  
32 with, so I haven't really taken a lot of opportunities to try to pursue that because I'm still trying  
33 to figure out me and still trying to maintain the situationships I currently have, knowing that the  
34 two years in Kansas had a shelf life. I was just like let me collect all of my humans and keep  
35 them as tightly close to me as I can and make sure that that maintains and is still a thing. But I  
36 have this conversation a lot with other non-binary friends. There is just no dating apps, right. You  
37 have to click a gender even when you download a dating app so it's just like let me not even invest and  
38 having to have a lot of conflicting conversations with myself of do I bother because I don't really fit into  
39 folks perspective of what they think their attraction currently is or do I pour myself into trying to  
40 convince someone that I fit into what you think your sexuality is because mine is just pretty  
41 freewheeling and I'm just attracted to whatever - it's just kind of a super fluid thing and it has always  
42 been a pretty fluid thing and now that my gender is also in this flux, my sexuality is just fluxing in a

- 1 different pattern and I'm just trying to figure out what lands and what fits. I haven't had a lot of  
2 opportunity to really even invest in that or feel like I have the energy because I don't want to have to  
3 educate someone on how to love me. I think that's what has kept me kind of away from even really  
4 trying to have conversations with folks who might be good healthy partners for me, that I think would  
5 work with me, but I just don't feel like playing educator. So that's just been really taxing too to just kind  
6 of think through a lot of that, it just gets exhausting and I'm like, "Relationships are stupid." And then I  
7 just kind of get up on that.
- 8 AJ: So you said you sort of identified as bi-, what would you call your sexual identity today?
- 9 RB: I would just toss a queer word on it and just leave it at that. I think that's just been the most fitting.
- 10 AJ: What does queer mean to you?
- 11 RB: Oooh, just . . . oooh, I don't know. It means nothing and everything at the same time I feel like and I  
12 think that that is why I use it. It's kind of like I can pull the lever on the slot machine and it's going to  
13 toss out some things on the slots and that's what we're going to go with today and that's going to be  
14 fine. Whatever fits and feels comfortable and I think just the general concept of queerness for both  
15 gender and sexuality, for me, is just the ability to be nothing and everything at the same time. So I  
16 don't really know.
- 17 AJ: OK, all right. All right. Yeah, that's the beauty of queer, right? It's just whatever it is and whatever it's  
18 not - sort of. I don't know. Has there been a specific person or organization that has had a significant  
19 impact on you related to your gender identity?
- 20 RB: Probably, I'm just trying to navigate through that. I mean there is certainly folks that I've had fortune to  
21 encounter during a lot of my undergrad programming and doing big conference work stuff that I never  
22 thought in a million years that I'd have had the opportunity to meet. I think even at the time, because I  
23 wasn't really identifying in any way as trans then, did I realize just how miraculous those meetings  
24 were. I got to meet Janet Mock, I got to meet Laverne Cox within two years of each other. I think it  
25 was November of 2013 probably and then February of 2014, both of them. I was just like, "What is my  
26 world? What is my life?" And just having . . .
- 27 AJ: I've just got to throw in there both of those are friends of mine, I love them both - they are amazing.
- 28 RB: They're amazing. Just this really solid, fantastic humans but . . . I think what's really fascinating about  
29 how national rhetoric and conversations about trans folks is that these seem like these inaccessible  
30 humans in some ways because they're so lauded because they're one of very few, which is jacked in  
31 its own regard - so they feel like these really inaccessible people. But then to literally be sitting at a  
32 coffee table with Laverne or having a 15-minute conversation with Janet about media stuff . . .
- 33 AJ: Right, and she'll give you some good media advice.
- 34 RB: Grounding, right? So that was really paramount for me eventually to just have the humanity of two  
35 folks that have made it in a way that a lot of trans folks never feel like they can and having them in  
36 Kansas City, in my hometown . . . well not hometown, but home at the time. My home, my place. I'm  
37 like, "This should have never happened, how is this a thing?" So having those opportunities at least,  
38 right. I think that's been really impactful.
- 39 AJ: Wow. Those two women have had a huge impact on me as well. They are both much younger and  
40 much more beautiful than I am.
- 41 RB: Stop.
- 42 AJ: But really amazing, they really are. You work for an LGBT organization now, or sort of. I mean it's a  
43 university system but your particular department. Have you ever worked for any other LGBT or trans  
44 specific organizations?

- 1 RB: Yes. So when I was in Kansas, even though it was part-time, it was a similar office to what I'm doing  
2 now. It was our Center for Sexuality and Gender Diversity. My first year of grad school was our first  
3 year of having both the grad position that I was in and a full-time person. So I was doing, again, this  
4 type of work in Kansas. I did an internship over . . . two summers ago at the University of California-  
5 Riverside working in their LGBT Resource Center for six weeks. And then I currently am part of the  
6 executive team for a non-profit that does Midwest Sexuality and Gender Equity work.
- 7 AJ: Wow.
- 8 RB: That's kind of up and coming and brand new, a part of the founding group of people, so yeah I've  
9 definitely been situated and doing this type of work for a while in many places.
- 10 AJ: That's awesome, that's really great. So you've been doing it for a while, what do you think are the  
11 major issues facing the broadest sort of view of trans identity? So gender queer, people who are still  
12 sort of binary and all of that stuff that's in-between.
- 13 RB: For sure. I mean I probably have a dissertation of an answer in general, but just to kind of brief it . . .  
14 there is so much gatekeeping in so many ways, whether it's medical or education or access to  
15 anything really at that point - like just simple things like licenses and documents. It's just so pervasive  
16 how many instances in which trans folk of any identity within that subset is not accommodated or  
17 considered in literally anything. So that's pie in the sky world view, that's the starting point. I know for  
18 me, because education is the medium through which I do the work - access to higher education in  
19 general especially for multiply marginalized populations, not tracking that data when we even accept  
20 students into the university. That's what is always on my mind, it might not be necessarily probably be  
21 the most immediate and most necessary, but I know that for me we can't expect to educate and uplift  
22 and get folks to a place where they are even part of the game let alone on the playing field to really  
23 even feel like they can be successful in what they deem to be their version of success and that's what  
24 is really stressful for me is like I encounter so many people who aren't going to make it through their  
25 school programs. I have so many friends that I've lapped degree-wise because they're just not in it  
26 and they just don't feel like they fit. We have so many folks that are getting thrown into this giant  
27 machine that is higher ed and they get lost in the cogs and gears and are probably stuck somewhere  
28 in the bottom of the machine. If we just loosened the screws and took some of the plates off and  
29 realized that we could probably fix that, but we don't even take stock and realize that we're losing so  
30 much capacity for queer and trans folks - trans folks specifically. We're not doing . . . we're really not  
31 doing anything, I feel like.
- 32 AJ: Do you think the visibility that folks like Laverne and Janet, Caitlyn Jenner and other sort of superstar  
33 trans people has helped in some of that at all?
- 34 RB: I think it's a yes and. I think it's helped as far as getting folks to be aware that transness even exists,  
35 right? I think there was a lot of folks that didn't even realize that was a thing. I probably would have  
36 been one of them circa 15 years ago. "What is this?" I don't know what my reaction was but I do  
37 worry and I've had conversations in some ways too about . . . like at no fault of the people who have  
38 been put in these situations of being very lauded, high profile trans folk, what that means for folks that  
39 don't have the same access to certain resources, that don't go through a certain stereotypical  
40 trajectory of what we think transitioning means, that there is a start and stopping point to transitioning,  
41 that folks have to adhere to a certain beauty standard or aesthetic standard to be considered an  
42 acceptable or appropriately passing trans person. A lot of that nuance and complication to it because  
43 of how folks have picked up the trans conversation makes it a bit complicated, I think. So I think  
44 there's folks that we can refer to and I think that that's more useful than not, to be able to say, "You  
45 know a trans person whether you know it or not." It's impossible now to say, "You have no idea, you  
46 don't know anyone." So I think that helps break some barriers down too. What that conversation looks  
47 like after you say, "You for sure know a trans person," is still kind of a game battleship of what that  
48 person's response is going to be to that. Because I think through trainings that I've done, specifically  
49 back at Kansas with students of trying to check them on cis privilege and oh my goodness - they do  
50 not appreciate it, they do not like getting told that their inability to be attracted to a trans person is



- 1 inherently transphobic. They don't like being told that they hold semblances of privilege because they  
2 have access to certain things – they hate it.
- 3 AJ: Yeah, people don't like.
- 4 RB: No they don't.
- 5 AJ: What is your relationship to male privilege, white male privilege? In some ways, at least . . . yeah, you  
6 are probably perceived in the world as a white male. How do you deal with that?
- 7 RB: Well sometimes I wish the male part was more often than might be . . .
- 8 AJ: And I know you don't necessarily hold that identity so . . .
- 9 RB: Sure. But, definitely as a more trans masculine person, for sure, and that's definitely a hard internal  
10 conversation I have a lot and especially the male and masculine piece of that, is trying really hard to  
11 pass in certain spaces so that I don't get mis-gendered as female, so I go to this level of trying to  
12 masculinize in a certain way but what am I even able to base that off of? Very cis, very white washed  
13 perceptions of masculinity. I think I was fortunate, I guess is the most accessible word I have for that,  
14 during grad school that I had mentors that very much broke some notions and some barriers of toxic  
15 masculinity. We had lots of open conversations about toxic masculinity but I do know that in  
16 unraveling some of that that we weren't unraveling the whiteness of toxic masculinity. And I know  
17 what's been hard for the work that I do being at now my second predominantly white institution doing  
18 LGBT work . . .
- 19 AJ: PWI.
- 20 RB: Right.
- 21 AJ: I love that you're using this language.
- 22 RB: Is trying to navigate how do I, in my role and in my identities, wedge myself . . . or participate rather, in  
23 conversations about race and ethnicity and social justice without coopting space because I know that  
24 when I enter these spaces I'm leading with and being read with my whiteness by folks in the space but  
25 also knowing, especially in Kansas, that we didn't have trans folks of color to speak about queerness  
26 and transness in spaces where we were centering race. So having the squirm of we're not talking  
27 about queer and trans folk, which we need to be, but I can't just come in here as the white person and  
28 say, "You need to talk about queer and trans people." You do but trying to play the hopscotch of  
29 figuring out how to expand the conversation and to allow for the intersections when I knew that there  
30 was damage being done by not having that. And so for, I guess to pull that back on me, especially in  
31 the work trying to play that hopscotch perpetually of where does queerness and transness need to be  
32 uplifted but not centering my whiteness when I'm trying to center queerness and transness in spaces  
33 that it needs to be centered.
- 34 AJ: Right. Wow, that's pretty strong analytic . . . you know, approach. And I appreciate that, I think you  
35 have to be analytical in trying to walk that space as we all carry privilege and how do we deal with it,  
36 how do we think about it, how do we provide others access to that privilege – like how are we using  
37 our privileges. I think there's ways to open up spaces for others to sort of come through and do some  
38 of that work.
- 39 RB: Fore sure.
- 40 AJ: Wow. Tell me about those tattoos – let's see those tattoos.
- 41 RB: Well, so you can see three of . . . I think I now have 13 tattoos, most of which were accrued during  
42 college – both undergrad and grad, because I could do what I want then. This one is Andrea Gibson  
43 lyrics, I guess – I don't know what you would call a verse from a poem, but the Andrea Gibson lyrics  
44 that says, "It hurts to become." This one is an empowerment fist with floral design in it, which just on  
45 happenstance because I let the artist do what they wanted with the colors – they chose these and then

- 1 I had a student say, "Oh, you got gender queer flag colors." And I was like, "Apparently I did, I didn't  
2 know . . ."
- 3 AJ: So there's a gender-queer flag?
- 4 RB: There is a flag and it's purple, white and green. And I knew that before I got the tattoo, I knew that  
5 those were the colors of the flag but I let the artist do what they wanted.
- 6 AJ: I did not know there was a gender-queer flag.
- 7 RB: That was just a happenstance. There's flags for everything, some that I think don't need flags but they  
8 exist.
- 9 AJ: I've seen Bears flags, I've seen Cub flags . . .
- 10 RB: There's a list of lesbian flags . . .
- 11 AJ: I just have to give a shout-out to the Cubs, they won the World Series last night. Woo-woo. I'm from  
12 Chicago. Yes, so . . . I had to get it on tape.
- 13 RB: That's fine, you can have it.
- 14 AJ: Oh man, it's been 108 years – what can I say?
- 15 RB: That's fine, I totally get it. I totally do.
- 16 AJ: So, the feathers – what are the feathers?
- 17 RB: It's part of a charm bracelet. So the leadership academy that I was talking about that I went to  
18 between undergrad and grad . . .
- 19 AJ: What was it called?
- 20 RB: It's the . . . it's Camp Pride. Campus Pride hosts a weeklong leadership academy over the summer.  
21 I'd gone the year prior . . . I've gone twice. I went one year as a camper and went the next year as  
22 kind of a camp counselor, they call them Pride leaders. And so me and a faculty pairing oversaw . . .  
23 we spent specific time with a smaller group. I think there was eight folks in our den and at the end of  
24 the week we did a wrap-up, last den session. By the end of the week you get really close with these  
25 humans, they're just your people and everyone else was doing an activity where they threw a yarn ball  
26 around and said something that they appreciated about the other person. Well, my faculty partner  
27 had bought this huge barrel basically of all different types of beads and we all went around and gave  
28 everybody in the circle a bead and explained why we chose it. And so these are all the beads that I  
29 acquired from that activity and I have it still hanging in my car, but I was overdue for a tattoo and I was  
30 like, "What do I want to get?" So I got this one tattooed, so each one of these is a bead that I got from  
31 one of my campers.
- 32 AJ: Wow, it's beautiful. All of those are really incredibly beautiful.
- 33 RB: Thanks.
- 34 AJ: And they all have some very special meaning to you as well, it's not just Mickey Mouse or Daffy Duck,  
35 although with 13 tattoos you might have one that's just kind of a throw-away tattoo.
- 36 RB: I don't – no, actually.
- 37 AJ: They're all pretty special to you, huh? I guess when you're letting someone put a lot of ink into your  
38 skin in a specific design, a permanent design, you kind of want it to have some special meaning.
- 39 RB: Yes.

- 1 AJ: Wow, it's just been so amazing talking with you today, RB. Is there anything that you want to say  
2 about yourself, gender identity, the transgender movement – what does it mean to be at this point in  
3 history in the transgender movement that I did not bring out of you?
- 4 RB: I don't know. I don't know, you asked me some doozies, you threw me through the ringer on this. I  
5 don't know, just kind of all of that just really my mind is a perpetual puddle of how hard it is. I don't  
6 know, just the past two and a half years now of just doing this work specifically I just realize that I'm  
7 doing it for a reason and I don't know what else I would be doing. I can't imagine not being in higher  
8 ed specifically and trying to do this work. I know that there is so much work to be done, but then being  
9 able to kind of participate in a way that has so many revolving identities kind of in it and that I actually  
10 have a stake in it just kind of gives it a lot more purpose. To be a cis straight person and trying to  
11 understand and wrap my brain around and just watch from the sidelines would be boring. I like being  
12 in the thick of it and being able to say, "Here I am, here's why I'm invested in this, and here's why it's  
13 important." So . . . yeah.
- 14 AJ: Wow, that's pretty powerful. Thank you so much for sharing with us today, RB. I really, really  
15 appreciate it. Until we meet again.
- 16 RB: For sure.
- 17 AJ: Peace.