

Kate Bornstein
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

August 20, 2015



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.

Andrea Jenkins
jenki120@umn.edu
(612) 625-4379

1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ

2 Kate Bornstein -KB

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5 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project
6 at the University of Minnesota. Today is August 20, 2015, and I have the great pleasure of
7 interviewing performance artist, academic, author, all-around amazing human being and
8 transgender outlaw, Kate Bornstein. Kate can you just say your name, your preferred gender
9 pronouns, your current recognition of your gender identity, and what gender you were assigned
10 at birth?

11 KB: Okeydokey. Hi, I'm Kate Bornstein. It's a pleasure to be interviewed by Miss Andrea Jenkins,
12 the amazing oral historian and poet – Poet Laurette of United States trans.

13 AJ: Thank you.

14 KB: Let's see, I was assigned male at birth. Preferred pronouns . . . I like they, but I accept she and
15 her with a smile.

16 AJ: Great.

17 KB: That's sweet. I'm trying to figure out the best way to say my gender identity because at this
18 time and at this date, the language of transgender is shifting big time and I imagine it will
19 continue to shift the more closely we look at it, but right now I would call myself non-binary
20 transsexual . . . non-binary, femme-identified transsexual, or transgender . . . see, I don't know.
21 Non-binary says it but then, you know, there's my sexual identity, sexualized identity and I
22 would call that diesel-femme.

23 AJ: Diesel-femme, OK.

24 KB: Diesel-femme. Then there's the identity I live every day now and I would call that, "little old
25 lady". Really.

26 AJ: Little old lady.

27 KB: Little old lady – I am a little old lady.

28 AJ: How did it feel coming to acceptance of that identity?

29 KB: For me it was quite easy. I was . . . I had just come through two years of fighting cancer, lung
30 cancer and leukemia. I wouldn't have been able to afford it unless a whole bunch of friends and
31 supporters . . . they put a lot of money together for me and I was able to afford it, but as I
32 became alive I went from the identity of dying tranny, tranny is another part of my identity, to
33 alive and it was like, "Oh my God." And so, little old lady feels great – better than dead old
34 tranny.

35 AJ: I love that. I really want to make sure we get back to this word tranny and the use of the word
36 tranny.

- 1 KB: Oh, I'm sure we will.
- 2 AJ: But I just want to say that I'm so thrilled that you are feeling better health-wise and happy to say
3 that the cancer is . . .
- 4 KB: It's in remission. It's been a year and a half now. I had two cancers. I had lung cancer and
5 leukemia. They worked on my lung cancer and by mistake they cured the leukemia as well.
- 6 AJ: That is really good news.
- 7 KB: I'm happy as can be.
- 8 AJ: I'm so happy to hear that and happy to be able to call you a little old lady.
- 9 KB: Thank you.
- 10 AJ: Diesel-femme. What is that?
- 11 KB: Well femme – all right, femme, being a girly-girl. I've always liked that. I'm an old-school
12 transsexual, male to female transsexual. That was my identity for a long, long time. I went
13 through hormones, I went through surgery because that's what you did at my age in those days
14 – there was very little option not to, and still be able to call yourself a woman which I was
15 interested in doing, I invested in doing. But I never really got into pink or flowered skirts,
16 actually that's a lie – I've got a couple, they're really sweet. But I'm more like Starbuck in
17 Battlestar Galactica, the new Battlestar Galactica. She's femme but watch out – watch the fuck
18 out.
- 19 AJ: A tough femme.
- 20 KB: Yeah, a tough femme.
- 21 AJ: I think some people, in maybe cis gender terms, rocker chick.
- 22 KB: Rocker chick works – rocker chick totally works, yes. Girl with three arms works.
- 23 AJ: Girl with three arms.
- 24 KB: Riot girl works.
- 25 AJ: Riot girl – yeah. Lots of new language. So language, the language in the trans community has
26 really gone through some very, what I would say contentious controversial gyrations. One of
27 the most contentious words in the lexicon is the word tranny and the use of the word tranny.
28 Can you talk a little bit about your feelings on the word? And maybe you might even through in
29 some other words that have seemingly changed over time.
- 30 KB: Tranny. Many people don't know the history of the word, they assume it was an assigned hate
31 term or slur along the lines of the "n" word. That's not how it happened. Tranny was invented
32 by us in Sydney, Australia in the 1970s where drag was a big deal, and still the best drag shows
33 ever are in Sydney, Australia – they're amazing. So a lot of trans-identified women who were
34 assigned male at birth did drag, that's how you made your living. And so they were
35 transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens, and they were all doing drag to make money. They all
36 bickered amongst each other who is better than who, "Well the drag queens are better," "No,

1 the transsexuals are better.” “You are all freaks, we’re better.” And on and on and on. But they
2 worked together and they were family together, so they came up with a word that would say
3 family and that was tranny. In Australia they do the diminutive, that’s how they come up with
4 words. So tranny. I learned the word in the mid-1980s, late 1980s from my drag mom in San
5 Francisco, Doris Fish, who was the city’s preeminent drag queen and she’d come from Sydney.
6 And she schooled me in this word tranny, she said, “This way it means we’re family, darling.”
7 “Thank you mama.”

8 AJ: Dawling.

9 KB: Dawling. So we used it and we were trannies together. And F to M was just beginning to start,
10 the trans men were just beginning to become visible, Lou Sullivan was a neighbor of mine
11 around the corner, and he was the first big out trans man, wrote his book. So trans men and
12 cross dressers . . . cross dressers were also family. Transsexuals, we were all trannies and that
13 felt good. That got into the sex industry and became a genre – there was tranny porn, there
14 were tranny sex workers – chicks with dicks, she-males.

15 AJ: Lady boys.

16 KB: Lady boys was more from Thailand – that was later in my knowledge. And, my only guess is that
17 people who . . . because the only way they would have found out about the word is if they were
18 watching tranny porn or having been with a tranny sex worker and then hated themselves so
19 much that they turned it into a curse word. So it’s not really technically correct to say we’re
20 reclaiming a word – it was always ours. So, many people mistake the word for the hatred
21 behind the word and, in my generation, and I’m sure in future generations of trans people,
22 tranny is going to be a radicalized, sexualized identity of trans in the same way that faggot is a
23 prideful identity in the gay male community – not all gay men are faggots, but those who are are
24 proudly fags and those who are dykes are proudly dykes within the lesbian community, trannies
25 are proudly tranny within the transgender community. Does that mean we can’t call ourselves
26 that because some trans woman does not want to be called a tranny? No. I’m going to keep
27 calling myself a tranny. To the trans woman who gets called tranny, I’m sorry – as soon as . . .
28 you’ve got to look at why you’re getting called tranny and if you don’t pass, you’re going to be
29 read as a transgender person and then you fall back on the cultural view of trans folk which is
30 freak, disgusting, not worth living, we can hurt you. It has nothing to do with the word, it has
31 everything to do with the cultural attitude. So the word has stirred up a shit storm, but it’s not
32 the word.

33 AJ: Yeah, it’s the societal baggage that comes with the word.

34 KB: Bingo.

35 AJ: Freaks. You were recently featured on episodes of *I am Cait*, the reality show about Caitlyn
36 Jenner, formerly Bruce Jenner, the word famous Olympian and athlete and motivational speaker
37 and member of the Kardashian family. On the show you sort of . . . I think gently and sweetly
38 admonished Cait, that, you know, after you welcomed her to the club said, “Now get ready for
39 the freak factor and how are you dealing with the freak factor?”

- 1 KB: I was genuinely curious to see how a celebrity of that magnitude was going to deal with the fact
2 that so many people in the world consider trans people to be freaks. I was genuinely curious
3 how do you handle it with so many people probably saying that to you and if you look at her
4 Instagram or Twitter feed or YouTube, I don't read the comments on those anymore – they're
5 just so hateful and full of the word freak. She asked me how to deal with it best and I don't
6 know, that's up for every one of us. Some people who it's possible to go stealth, go stealth –
7 and that's great. I am not down on that at all. Most male to female trans folk have a hard time
8 going stealth if they transitioned too far after puberty, let's say – when our voice is deep and our
9 Adam's apple goes or we don't have enough money to pass well, whatever. We have to deal
10 with being seen as trans and that equaling freak. And so we all have to deal with it differently.
11 Me, I embrace it. I go, "Fuck it, yes, I am a freak – hello." Not that I'm a scary freak, I'm not –
12 I'm cute. I'm too cute to be scary. And that, embodying that kind of paradox, to me, is
13 delightful. I like the paradox of not man, not woman – that's how I call myself. And the paradox
14 of lovable freak – oh, that's great too. I'm fine. Smart blonde – there's another paradox that I
15 like to embody. I said that to Caitlyn, I said, "I embody it, that's how I do it and you have to if
16 you're going to do that – then please with love not with self-hatred." "Oh dear, I'm a freak."
17 No, you're not. Nobody is inherently a freak, there is no identity – circus geek I suppose would
18 be technically.
- 19 AJ: Technically, but I'm not sure if they necessarily . . . there's all sorts of expressions of being
20 human in our world and our society and our culture. This identity is one of them, absolutely.
21 You know, Caitlyn Jenner represents this really new level of visibility that I, as a person who has
22 been out for the past 23-plus years, and I suspect you have been out longer than that.
- 23 KB: Thirty years now.
- 24 AJ: Yeah. I have never seen this level of visibility from trans people starring on television shows, like
25 LaVerne Cox writing *New York Times* best seller books, like Janet Mock, the President of the
26 United States acknowledging the rights of transgender people and by creating a bathroom in the
27 White House that is welcoming to trans and gender non-conforming folks. These are big
28 symbols and symbolism is not everything but what are your ideas around this increased visibility
29 and what it means for the community?
- 30 KB: The genie is out of the bottle, you can't get it back in now. Trans is here to stay, it's not going to
31 go away now. That's what this particular level of visibility is doing and so many people . . . stars,
32 celebrities are modeling the celebration of trans, which I think is going to do amazing work
33 generations from now. I don't think it's going to happen overnight, it's not going to happen
34 within years. The degree to which this American brand of fundamentalist Christianity is
35 transphobic, misogynist and homophobic – to that degree, what's going on is not going to touch
36 them and that's going to be an ongoing battle. But when you've got stuff like Keanu Reeves,
37 movie star, dating Jamie Clayton and being out and very happy about it, that's a big deal, that's
38 a great big deal because here's a big old star saying, "Yeah, I'm really hooked on this trans girl, I
39 love her." And you go, "Good, finally some guy is coming out and saying, 'You know, part of my
40 sexual orientation includes her.'" And you go, "Yay, oh good, good, good." So to me, that's now
41 made room for, and it never has been here before, the gender-queer, non-binary side of trans
42 that I've been writing about for a long time now – the rest of us, the people who aren't men and

- 1 the people who aren't women. Without the visibility of women like Caitlyn and Jen Richards
2 and Candis Cayne who are on that show, and Shandi . . . what's Shandi's last name?
- 3 AJ: Boy, I can't recall.
- 4 KB: Anyway . . .
- 5 AJ: It's an "S" I believe, is it Schmidt? Smith? Sorry Shandi.
- 6 KB: Sorry Shandi. What they're doing is not normalizing trans. I think that would be a mistake to
7 think that that's what is going on. But the very first step in celebration is learning acceptance
8 and I think that's what is being modeled, that's what is happening with that level of visibility.
9 Now beyond acceptance, there is welcoming. Beyond welcoming, there is celebrating and that's
10 where we need to be eventually. I don't know what trans identities are coming up beyond non-
11 binary or gender non-conforming and gender-queer, but that will be interesting to see too.
- 12 AJ: That will be interesting – and I do believe that's going to be more identities beyond that.
- 13 KB: There's got to be – got to be. We're blind to something right now.
- 14 AJ: So let me ask you about your thoughts, I mean you were . . . you were certainly alive and I think
15 maybe active or had some awareness during the Stonewall uprisings. And if not directly
16 involved, certainly have had some awareness and understanding of it since. Do you have any
17 thoughts on the new movie that is being released in Hollywood and this controversy that the
18 movie is being whitewashed and trans women of color are being written out of the narrative of
19 that whole movement, if we can call it that – starting this gay rights movement? What's your
20 thoughts on those?
- 21 KB: It pisses me off. The movie that you're referring to, I think, is simply called, *Stonewall*. Not
22 many people outside LGBTQ land know the significance of Stonewall so people going to see that
23 movie, if indeed it makes it out into release with all the furor against it now, but whoever sees
24 that movie is going to believe that's the history of Stonewall – that it was all about a white man
25 brave enough to throw the first bottle at the police and that is just not the case, they weren't.
- 26 AJ: They were not.
- 27 KB: In the same way that this movie is whitewashing and invisibilizing trans, what's happening now
28 in the new trans movement, trans activism, is that they're invisibilizing anyone who is not
29 properly transgender. Again, back to drag queens, back to chicks with dicks, back to she-males,
30 self-identifying and trannies – nope, that's not part of our movement. These are the same
31 people who were kicked out of women's rights. So maybe in the next iteration, like once trans
32 has kind of got its seat at the table, or at least binary-identified trans has its seat at the table,
33 then maybe the next up and coming part of sex and gender revolution will be sex-positive
34 gender anarchists and I look forward to that.
- 35 AJ: Wow, so do I. I love that you keep referencing these future generations, I think that's really
36 critical. But I also see a trend . . . I've been watching the show *I am Jazz* with love and
37 fascination – deep love and fascination. Jazz is a young trans woman who came out very early in
38 life.

- 1 KB: Six or something.
- 2 AJ: Six or seven and was featured on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and really has been in the public eye
3 but now with a reality series. One of the things that struck me is that people are coming out
4 younger and younger, they're having access to medical interventions that are able to . . . at the
5 very minimum, delay secondary sex characteristics of the opposite gender and help to boost the
6 desired secondary sex characteristics such as breast development in young girls or facial hair
7 development in young boys and those kinds of things, which sort of creates this bypass from the
8 transgender journey that most trans-identified people have been on up to this point in human
9 history. And so, consequently, those young people are going to represent a new class, if you
10 will, of transgender.
- 11 KB: Exactly – a new social class of transgender, if, in fact, they identify as transgender – they may
12 not. Some may, some may not. I think that's wonderful and I think that the transgender
13 movement is still going to be populated by trans men and trans women who go through that
14 terrible time of not one/not the other, walking down the street and people turning, "What the
15 fuck are you?" That sort of thing. All of us these days these days go through that and there is
16 this new identity – my fear for that identity is it's a ticking time bomb . . . not a time bomb but a
17 bomb that could go off, more like a land mine. If someone finds out, if someone is in a hospital,
18 for example, who has been a woman or a boy or a man all their life and then they go to a
19 hospital and all of a sudden the doctor says, "Wait a minute, I don't see a uterus here, did you
20 have a hysterectomy?" "No." And so then they're outed. That's a whole new kind of problem, I
21 have no idea how that is going to be dealt with.
- 22 AJ: Yeah, which brings up an issue around resiliency. What do you think the role of resiliency plays
23 in transgender lives?
- 24 KB: Everything. You're going to get shit, you're going to get shit from people who are cis gender,
25 people who are transgender because you're not doing transgender right. You've got to bounce
26 back, you've got to let that stuff slide off. I'm not good at letting stuff slide off. I live with
27 borderline personality so I'm mentally fucked up. I have no control over my emotions, I have
28 none. I've been in very intense therapy called dialectic behavior therapy which helps me deal
29 with emotions and deal with being triggered because pretty much anything triggers a person
30 with borderline personality - what is resilience but moving forward in the face of triggering
31 circumstances.
- 32 AJ: Has there been a specific moment or person or organization that has had a significant impact on
33 you related to your gender identity?
- 34 KB: So many people. I keep coming back to Doris Fish, my drag mom. She made it OK to have fun,
35 she made it OK to not be serious all the fucking time. It's a very serious situation when you're a
36 trans person trying to navigate a cis world. It's hard and it takes all of your strength. But, my
37 God, if you can't sit and laugh, if you can't just celebrate every now and then – and celebrate
38 most of the time, frankly . . . most of the time, then it's big trouble. Then it's harder to be
39 resilient. So I'm going to give my drag mom that – yeah.

- 1 AJ: That's wonderful. Tell me about this concept of moms and fathers in the trans community. I
2 know some of that grows out of the ball culture, but what's your take on it. How did that come
3 about for you?
- 4 KB: We all need family. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a nuclear family – mom, dad, and I
5 had an older brother. They were, for the most part, loving people. My father expressed it very
6 hard – he was an abusive, angry man. Actually one of the main reasons, I think, I never wanted
7 to be a man was him as my example of manhood. But, we search for family – we want mom,
8 don't you?
- 9 AJ: Yes, absolutely.
- 10 KB: Mama. And so we find moms, we find sisters and brothers and cousins and uncles and aunts
11 and we own identities. Now that I'm older, I'm owning grandma.
- 12 AJ: Yes.
- 13 KB: And I get to be grandma with a lot of trans youth and I like to spoil my grandkids. For a long
14 time and in another generation, in your time, your auntie.
- 15 AJ: Absolutely. And I bow down to you as that.
- 16 KB: I'm your big sister, more of your big sister.
- 17 AJ: Big sister, mama – all of that.
- 18 KB: I love you – my baby girl.
- 19 AJ: Yes.
- 20 KB: And so that makes us feel . . . that reminds us that we are loved. Again, that notion of family is
21 so necessary or we are bone-lonely and suicidal if we're that lonesome. And what helped, what
22 always helped, was a word for family – tranny was one, and now we're not allowed to say it.
23 Another was, for a long time, transgender. But now – no, because there was a transgender
24 tipping point, people in popular culture are examining the word transgender for those who
25 made the tipping and those are binary-identified trans people. Trans men, trans women – there
26 are men and there are women, great. But now that's . . . they own the word transgender.
27 What's really great about this tipping point is that people acknowledge that it has nothing to do
28 with genitalia or hormones . . . what genitals you have as a man or a woman, not important.
29 What hormones you're on as a man or woman, not important. It's a matter of individual
30 preference and ability to go forward in that. But what it's done has taken another family word
31 away from us – transgender. When we were starting to use it in the 1980s, well Virginia Prince
32 coined the term. She was a cross dresser who wanted to live full time as a woman without
33 hormones or surgery so she called herself transgender and we stole the word from her for which
34 we never got forgiven – me and Jamison Green and Lou Sullivan and Les Feinberg. We started
35 using transgender as anybody who fucks with gender – your family. So no matter the fights and
36 the struggles, look – we're all transgender together. Now that word has now shifted to a family
37 term of trans and that still, to some degree, leaves out people who are non-binary or gender
38 queer. Without invisibilizing those folks, I think trans . . . I say those folks, I mean me, trans
39 includes, for the time being, non-binary and gender queer. So the degree we police our own

- 1 language and say, "You get out of here, that's my word," we have to be careful that we're not
2 destroying family relationships, that we are chosen family. I would just caution going down that
3 path and policing words like that.
- 4 AJ: So much wisdom right there. Where did you grow up, Kate?
- 5 KB: All right, this is the northern Midwest right here, right?
- 6 AJ: Yes.
- 7 KB: So I grew up just outside of Fargo and my father was a Lutheran minister, my mom was Miss
8 Betty Crocker 1938. My brother tends the goats . . . actually tended the goats until the day he
9 died. See now that's a bio I put up on the web about myself because I always wanted to be a
10 corn-fed Midwestern girl, right? I was a Jew-boy from New Jersey. I grew up on the Jersey shore
11 just like the television show pretty much. But I always wanted to be from the Midwest so I gave
12 myself that fantasy childhood.
- 13 AJ: That little Lake Wobegan moment, huh?
- 14 KB: Exactly. It was funny because I put it up as a joke and the last sentence of that bio always read,
15 "I grew up in a log cabin that I helped my parents build." "I was born in a log cabin that I helped
16 my parents build." Nobody quite got that, but people write reviews of my books occasionally,
17 "Oh, you can see Kate Bornstein's warm Midwestern heart in every page." I go, "Not really, but
18 thank you."
- 19 AJ: Oh boy. What was your relationship like with your biological mom?
- 20 KB: There's a thing between moms and sons that's wonderful. Moms love their sons, it's just terrific
21 and we had that. When I came out she said, "Don't bother coming back to this house." And we
22 were out of touch for like six months and . . . she lived on the Jersey shore and there was a bad
23 hurricane and I called to find out how she was doing. She was OK and she asked me how I was
24 doing and I said OK. She called me Albert, which was my name. She said, "How are you doing,
25 Albert?" I'd stopped correcting her at that point – what are you doing to do? I said, "Well it's
26 hard." I just started crying. People at work were giving me a hard time at that moment, on that
27 day. I said, "I can't talk," and I hung up on her. She called back in 15 minutes or so and she said,
28 "Baby, Kate?" That was the first time she'd called me Kate and we had seven good years of
29 mother/adult daughter time, which never really happens. So I was very fortunate to have a
30 good mom, both as a boy and as a woman. Yeah.
- 31 AJ: Thank you. What do you think the relationship is between the L, the G, the B and the T?
- 32 KB: I think it's very dangerous to continue using letters like that. I Googled it, I used the Google
33 machine and I was looking up sexuality and gender identity and in 20 minutes I found close to
34 700 very specific identities for sexualities, for gender identities, for things that combined both.
- 35 AJ: 700?
- 36 KB: Yes ma'am.
- 37 AJ: You mean there's not just two?

- 1 KB: So even saying LGBT and if you're going to be nice and say Q, that leaves a lot of people out and
2 as people come out as more visible people, the Caitlyn Jenner's who come out, the guys who
3 come out on football teams as gay – brave, brave. To a child that means, Oh, OK that's how to
4 be a gay man, that's how to be a trans woman and they go, "I don't know if I can live up to that."
5 Very few people can. What I would like to see is a name for this overlapping community of
6 identities that are based in sexuality and gender. Right?
- 7 AJ: Right.
- 8 KB: In such a way as these are consciously lived genders, consciously lived sexualities – so conscious
9 gender would be . . . that's oxymoronic in a culture that believes there's only two. So just by
10 saying I'm conscious of my gender and living it this way, whether you're "cis" or "trans", which
11 are both made-up words, conscious gender means you're breaking the laws of gender already
12 because gender is supposed to be, "Oh, you never take that into account, you just know what
13 you are." No – you don't know what you are. So there's gender anarchy. In terms of sexuality,
14 conscious sexuality is a . . . that's very rare that people get to be really conscious of what they I
15 like in sex. What do you like in sex? Do you know the Top 10 ways you like to be touched?
16 Where? Maybe not, in which case learn baby learn.
- 17 AJ: Learn your desire.
- 18 KB: So we've got gender anarchy on one hand, we've got sex positivity on the other hand and
19 instead of LGBT I would go gender anarchy GA, sex positivity SP, GASP. It's way too cute to be
20 used but that's the kind of thing I've been looking for. One thing we could use that's a known
21 acronym – there's Gay Straight Alliance in high school, GSA. I think that's a misnomer because I
22 don't think gay . . . there are too many straight gay people and there are a lot of queer
23 heterosexual people, but GSA could really stand for Gender Sexuality Alliance.
- 24 AJ: I like that.
- 25 KB: Now that would be good, I think that could replace LGBT.
- 26 AJ: I heard another one.
- 27 KB: Go for it.
- 28 AJ: I call it SOGI – Sexual Orientation Gender Identity.
- 29 KB: SOGI. It's kind of like GASP, it won't work.
- 30 AJ: It won't work.
- 31 KB: Nah. It sounds like a little animated creature. I'm a SOGI. LGBT are lesbi-gators.
- 32 AJ: Oh boy.
- 33 KB: Of course that's good and that's the kind of thing we need to go towards. I don't know. That's
34 not going to be for you or me to decide.

1 AJ: Has your gender identity or your expression of your gender identities had any impact on your
2 professional life, your ability to make a living for yourself, your ability to contribute in the ways
3 that you want to contribute?

4 KB: When I first came out and started living full time as a woman, I was a man in a dress. I couldn't
5 get any work. I almost got fired from the job I was on but my sales were too good so they
6 couldn't fire me. But once I left there nobody would hire me so I went into phone sex. I didn't
7 have enough confidence in my body and I was older, I was 36 or 37 – I didn't have enough
8 confidence in my body to do sex work, I didn't think anybody would be attracted to me.

9 AJ: What?

10 KB: Yeah. Well . . . yeah. So I did phone sex work. I made my living doing phone sex for a couple of
11 years. And that led me to do . . . I could do telephone sales. That was allowed to me, but no
12 one else was hiring me – no. It helped launch me into theatre and writing, which are both sort
13 of gender-free professions. But I couldn't get any parts except trans parts in those days. So that
14 meant I had to write my own shows and produce my own shows and tour them. So that's what I
15 ended up doing.

16 AJ: And amazingly so. I've just been enamored by your theatrical and performative presence since I
17 first became aware of it. The writings that you do, the book *Gender Outlaws* and the
18 subsequent books have made such a huge impact, I think, on women's studies, feminist studies,
19 queer studies, American studies. Your work has impacted a lot of people, a lot of bills,
20 academia, and the way, I think, people view performance art. How do you feel about the impact
21 of your career? Just talk to me a little bit about that.

22 KB: First off, let me trade admiration with you, Ms. Performance Poet. I think I first heard you, it
23 was in Minneapolis at that bookstore, and oh my God. You just have such electricity with an
24 audience, you have so much power with your words – Namaste sister of mine.

25 AJ: Namaste.

26 KB: What do I think of the impact of my life? Ahhh . . . I'm sort of half Buddhist, half Taoist, half
27 Jewish. And I'm pretty sure that whatever we do doesn't matter a fuck, we're all . . . I'm pretty
28 sure of that. What it boils down to, I think, is very good intentions. Whoever said the road to
29 hell is paved with good intentions . . . no, I think that's the only thing that will get us to heaven.
30 If we can honestly have good intentions, and a good intention isn't, "Oh, I am good by forcing
31 that person to be good like me." No – no, no, no. Good intention is, "I want to help that person
32 stop suffering" – period. So to develop those kinds of good intentions, I'm grateful that I've had
33 an opportunity to develop those with the feedback I've been getting from my writing. Because
34 if you know you put out good loving stuff, people respond to you with good loving stuff – it goes
35 back and forth, back and forth. I'm a better person for the people who have admired my work,
36 not because of their admiration but because I hear myself back through their voices and I go,
37 "OK, great – OK, great." Then we are on a correct track together. I'm happy, I could die happy.
38 The book I'm most proud of though is, *Hello Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens,
39 Freaks, and Other Outlaws*. While transgender is a big factor in it, that's not the focus of the
40 book. I know that one helps save lives so I'm happy with that one.

- 1 AJ: Wow.
- 2 KB: Yeah.
- 3 AJ: That's something to be very proud of. What's up next for Kate Bornstein?
- 4 KB: I'm working on a book with a working title of *Trans: Just for the fun of it*.
- 5 AJ: I love it.
- 6 KB: I want to get away from this it's all deadly serious. The great beauty for me of trans has been
7 the joy of being a girl – for goodness sake. Wow. And the fun sex I have by being a girl. Wow.
8 So I just want to encourage more and more people to enjoy the gender you're being and enjoy
9 sex, or no sex, with it. I think right now I'm kind of going through a period of, well I am,
10 between BDSM as my sexuality – bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism and asexuality.
- 11 AJ: Huh?
- 12 KB: Yeah, I have long periods where I'm just not interested and then the periods I am interested, it's
13 more of an interest in SM.
- 14 AJ: Intense contact sport.
- 15 KB: Yeah. I'm a bottom, I like receiving.
- 16 AJ: OK, that's wonderful. Thank you. You can actually . . . I think you can technically be engaged
17 with BDSM and still be asexual . . . or maybe non-sexual would be more the term. Like you're
18 not . . . you can be engaged with BDSM and not have penetrated or . . . other kinds of genital
19 sex.
- 20 KB: Right.
- 21 AJ: So not quite the same as asexual but that is possible.
- 22 KB: So what I'm working on is that book and beyond that I've got a young adult novel I want to
23 write, kind of loosely based on *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. My Holly Golightly is going to be a young
24 trans woman named Charlie Valentine and she's going to be . . . she's 17-years-old and she's a
25 professional dominatrix in New York City.
- 26 AJ: That's a plot line. Charlie Valentine. Oh boy, I can't wait to meet her.
- 27 KB: I know, right?
- 28 AJ: Yeah. Wow. Well, Kate, this has been delightful. I should mention that we're here at Gender
29 Odyssey in Seattle, Washington, so we're not in Minneapolis or New York City. What message
30 do you want the attendees of this conference to sort of leave with?
- 31 KB: There are many truths of gender – many truths of gender. It behooves us to respect other
32 people's truths of gender to the degree it eases their suffering and doesn't cause any suffering
33 in turn. I think if we, as a trans movement, were operating more on that kind of a, "Oh, you're a
34 what? Oh wow, cool – I don't know what that is but you look happy." Then to that degree, and
35 again it gets back to family. I'm trying to push family.

- 1 AJ: Yes.
- 2 KB: Right now I've got a lot of my grandkids pissed off at me. I love them too. I do.
- 3 AJ: Babies don't always like to take their medicine.
- 4 KB: No – no, and that's OK.
- 5 AJ: Is there a transgender movement?
- 6 KB: No, there are many transgender movements because globally there's no agreement on what
7 transgender is. My book, *Gender Outlaws*, just came out in mainland China in Mandarin.
- 8 AJ: Wow, congratulations.
- 9 KB: Thank you. I have no idea what it says. It came out in Korea, no idea what that book says. But
10 they're going to have fun with gender. "Cool, go for it." And, for example, in China they
11 couldn't call it Gender Outlaw because Chinese hear the word outlaw – that's just a bad person.
12 Bad, bad, bad. "Gender outlaw is like a sex . . . like a baby raper." "No, no – Gender outlaw,
13 don't call it that." "What do we call it? I don't know." I said, "Gender is a Butterfly." "No, no,
14 no," they told me. "If a Chinese person sees that they'll think it's a children's book." I said,
15 "OK." "Gender is a cocoon because it's always cooking and you're always in the process of
16 change." "No," they said, "Chinese people would see that and hear it as a trap, you're trapped
17 inside this thing." I said, "I give up." And they said, "Gender is a caterpillar." I said, "What?"
18 "Gender is a wooly worm," that's their kid's name for caterpillar. And that's the name of the
19 book – because caterpillars to a Chinese mind is full of possibility. Who knows what beautiful
20 creature this person is going to become. So it's called *Gender is a Wooly Worm*.
- 21 AJ: In China.
- 22 KB: In China.
- 23 AJ: Oh, this has been fascinating. I'm so grateful and deeply honored that you decided to spend a
24 little time talking with us, talking about your life, talking about the movement, talking about
25 these young trans people and gender non-confirming and gender anarchists and all of these
26 identities that we don't even have labels for yet. I really, really appreciate it. Fifty years from
27 now, what do you want that broad spectrum of gender fuckers to think about?
- 28 KB: Fifty years from now. No, not going there sweetie. I would hope that there is a huge decrease
29 in gender-based suffering. That's what I would hope – and that would include misogyny, first
30 and foremost, because that's where most of the gender-based suffering is focused – on female,
31 feminine-type people, cis or trans. That's got to be the focus. I'm hoping that kids get more of a
32 chance to explore gender as they're growing up so that they can make informed decisions. That
33 would be good.
- 34 AJ: Thank you, Kate Bornstein.
- 35 KB: Thank you for inviting me. Anything you invite me to do, Miss Jenkins, I'm yours.
- 36 AJ: I love you.

1 KB: I love you.