

Eli Clare
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

March 1, 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.

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

1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ

2 Eli Clare -EC

3

4

5 AJ: So, hello. My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral
6 History Project at the University of Minnesota. Today is March 1, 2016, and I just learned that
7 March 1st is the anniversary date of the Nuclear Disarmament March that happened 30 years
8 ago.

9 EC: Let's call it the Great Peace March for Global and Nuclear Disarmament. It started in Los
10 Angeles and ended eight and a half months later in Washington, DC. Four hundred of us walked
11 the whole way.

12 AJ: Oh my God, how incredible.

13 EC: Here I am 30 years later.

14 AJ: Still on the front lines for social justice and world peace. So I'm talking with Eli Clare. Eli, I'm
15 going to ask you to introduce yourself. State your name, what your preferred gender pronouns
16 are, your gender identity and your gender assigned at birth.

17 EC: OK. I'm Eli Clare. My internal gender identity is gender queer and I live in the world as a white
18 man. And both of those things are really important – how I live in the world and how people see
19 me and what's true internally. I was assigned female at birth and my preferred pronouns are he
20 and him.

21 AJ: Wow.

22 EC: And, let me say another thing about pronouns. When I was doing sexual transition, so changing
23 my name and changing my pronouns, they wasn't quite available.

24 AJ: They?

25 EC: No one was using they yet. I suspect if I was doing sexual transition now I would have picked
26 they rather than he, but I'm not interested in another pronoun transition.

27 AJ: Right, oh boy. So do you think this pronoun shift in language is a generational thing? Because I
28 know that one of my dear friends, the late Leslie Feinberg, really promoted sort of an alternative
29 pronoun usage but it didn't really catch on until much later. What's your thought about that?

30 EC: Language is interesting because what catches and what doesn't . . . because there have been
31 dozens of attempts to do gender neutral, singular, third-person pronouns. We could spend 10
32 minutes listing them from ze and hir to co and per. Just a long list of pronouns that over the last
33 number of decades have been tried out and none of them have caught culturally. And part of
34 the function of pronouns is that they're familiar and they're easy. Because pronouns as
35 language kind of are supposed to disappear, except trans people know that they often don't
36 kind of disappear, right? That's one of the things we bring to the world – that pronouns don't
37 kind of disappear, that they identify us in these profound ways that become visible only when

- 1 they're wrong and do damage when they're wrong. But, some have them have enhanced so
2 much of the work that Leslie Feinberg, among others, was engaged in around pronouns – that
3 those words never became common, familiar, and easy. So they never caught on. And why
4 didn't they catch on? Who knows? But there is something about they that has started to catch
5 culturally.
- 6 AJ: It has, it's very interesting.
- 7 EC: They was the word of the year, I think.
- 8 AJ: Is that right?
- 9 EC: This year or last year. And so it has started to catch. It makes me think of Ms. and how Ms.
10 caught. But before Ms. caught, Ms. was seen as this complete radical outlier that would never,
11 never become common usage. And then, who knows why Ms. caught. And so you had asked me
12 whether I thought they was a generational thing. I think some of it is generational, some of it is
13 this kind of mysterious configuration of cultural factors because why has they started to catch
14 when ze and hir never caught, for instance. I don't think . . . so some of it is generational but
15 there is probably other stuff in there.
- 16 AJ: You used the phrase and I didn't quite catch it when you . . . you were giving some examples of
17 various pronouns, you said ze and zir and then there was another one.
- 18 EC: Ze and hir and co and per.
- 19 AJ: Co . . . c-o. And Per . . .
- 20 EC: P-e-r.
- 21 AJ: P-e-r.
- 22 EC: And co and per didn't even catch long enough for . . . it just had a single moment and I know
23 because I happened to be there at that moment.
- 24 AJ: At that moment. So Eli, I want to get a little reflective, and I know you have lots of really
25 interesting things for us to think about. But tell me, what's your earliest memory in life?
- 26 EC: My earliest memory in life is . . . so I was born with cerebral palsy and no one knew what was
27 wrong with me. Big air quotes around "wrong" and my parents took me to a variety of doctors
28 over the first 10 or 12 years of my life trying to get a diagnosis. My first memory is during that
29 diagnostic work when I was two and a half years old. They took me to the Fairview Training
30 Center in Salem, Oregon. Fairview was a state-run institution for people with what they then
31 called mental retardation, now called intellectual disability. But at that time, the language was
32 mental retardation. It was a place where 3000 people lived and the place where people lived
33 their entire lives – a very, very grim place. My parents brought me to Fairview for diagnostic
34 testing. I was walking by that point but I was not talking, I didn't have a single word. So my first
35 memory is being on the table surrounded by people in white coats and being afraid I was going
36 to fall off the table.
- 37 AJ: Boy, wow. That's kind of terrifying.

1 EC: Yes – yes. And that whole piece of diagnostic work was a terrifying moment in my life. The
2 diagnosis that came back was mental retardation. I bombed the IQ test because I wasn't talking.
3 The alternative IQ test is a test that requires a lot of manual dexterity and I don't have a whole
4 lot of manual dexterity now and I had even less when I was two and a half years old. I did very,
5 very badly on the IQ test, a diagnosis of mental retardation. If my parents had wanted to leave
6 me at Fairview, they could easily have done that. I fit the profile exactly of what kinds of
7 children were left at Fairview. So, it's my first memory and it's this moment that profoundly
8 shaped my entire life because, of course, if I had been left there I would have probably stayed
9 there until Fairview started moving people out just before their doors were closed. I would have
10 lived there for 30 years.

11 AJ: Wow.

12 EC: And I would have moved to a group home. So the whole progression of my life . . . I wouldn't be
13 here.

14 AJ: It would have been dramatically different – absolutely.

15 EC: Right. So that's my first memory.

16 AJ: Wow. I've asked this question 56 times now and I don't think anybody has identified their first
17 memory as shaping their entire life.

18 EC: Right.

19 AJ: Where did you grow up?

20 EC: I grew up on the south coast of Oregon in a wide spot in the road called Port Orford.

21 AJ: Port?

22 EC: Port Orford. O-r-f-o-r-d. Fishing and logging town.

23 AJ: So near the ocean?

24 EC: Yes, on the ocean – 70 miles north of the California border.

25 AJ: So southern Oregon?

26 EC: Right.

27 AJ: What was it like growing up Port Orford?

28 EC: Port Orford. It was small, it was a town of 1000 people.

29 AJ: 1000?

30 EC: 1000. My father taught high school so everyone knew us. So there was no anonymity. I was
31 one of the only disabled children in town and I was the first disabled kid to be mainstreamed in
32 that school district. I started 1st grade in 1969, so well before the ADA and Section 504, the
33 Rehabilitation Act, which is what gave disabled children guaranteed access to public school.
34 What else was it like? My parents desperately did not want a disabled child. My mother
35 desperately did not want a gender ambiguous child.

- 1 AJ: Oh wow.
- 2 EC: I was one of those girls who was mistaken as a boy since I was five years old. And she
3 desperately did not want that. We fought about clothes.
- 4 AJ: Really?
- 5 EC: But actually we didn't fight because she won and I just put up with it, I just put up with it. But
6 she was really desperate. Both of my parents were really desperate not to have a disabled child.
7 My mom was really desperate not to have this gender-odd child. And my life was really caught
8 between those two places of my mom really not wanting for me to be who I was in really
9 profound ways. Because there was nothing to do about either piece.
- 10 AJ: Wow. Siblings? Did you have siblings?
- 11 EC: Yes. I'm the oldest and I have a sister three years younger and a brother who is six years
12 younger.
- 13 AJ: OK. So you were mainstreamed, sort of pre-legislative entry for disabled young people to go to
14 public school. Were you teased? Were you bullied? Were you supported? How was that?
- 15 EC: I was brutally teased. The way that bullying works is that really no one instance of bullying is
16 horrible but it's the stack and the stack gets higher and higher and higher. I was bullied
17 relentlessly from the time I started public school through the 6th grade. And that progressively
18 went from taunts to having rocks and sand and rubber erasers thrown at me to being beaten up.
19 By the time I was in 6th grade I was being beaten fairly regularly by my classmates. And then it
20 stopped in 7th grade, it was done. Instead of being bullied, I was completely alone. Of the two, I
21 vastly preferred being alone.
- 22 AJ: Yeah.
- 23 EC: Vastly. And most of that bullying was around disability but at some point they started calling
24 me, "Lezzy." I don't know why. I have no idea why that started. And the first time I heard the
25 word lesbian was from the bullies, in the form of the word, "Lezzy."
- 26 AJ: Wow. So the bullying and the taunting inundated initially from your physical disabilities and
27 then progressed to sort of perception of your sexuality.
- 28 EC: Right.
- 29 AJ: Wow. I would suspect, based on just kind of what you have said, perceived gender
30 transgressions as well.
- 31 EC: Yes. That wasn't the language but I'm sure it's part of what propelled that. Right. So I was this
32 tomboy who was insistent on doing everything I could and more than I could, which meant
33 falling and . . . I mean my knees were always bloody because I would fall and fall and fall and fall.
- 34 AJ: You just had to climb that tree, huh?
- 35 EC: Right, exactly. Really rough and tumble with balance and coordination stuff that meant that I
36 was just . . . I was kind of a mess.

- 1 AJ: Oh boy. But you had a spirit. I can just hear it, like there was this fighting spirit.
- 2 EC: Yup. First you asked me about my first memory and your saying fighting spirit, makes me think
3 of a story my mother used to tell me that's kind of my first . . . the first story she had of me that I
4 remember her telling me. So I was born two months premature in 1963. Two months
5 premature now isn't a big deal.
- 6 AJ: Right.
- 7 EC: But two months premature in 1963 in rural Oregon was a really frigging big deal. I lived in an
8 incubator and she was not allowed to do more than stand at the door and watch me. I was
9 there for a month. She tells a story when she's at the door watching me and the nurse comes by
10 and they're standing at the door and the nurse says, "Which one is yours?" And my mom points
11 me out and they must have been talking about whether I would live or not, and the nurse says
12 to my mom, "She's going to live, we always know which ones are going to live because they're
13 the fighters." And that's the first story my mom has of who I am.
- 14 AJ: A fighter.
- 15 EC: Right. "She's going to live, she's a fighter."
- 16 AJ: Wow, that's pretty . . . I'm getting chills. But it's very apparent in your comportment and in this
17 nebulous thing we call spirit. When is the first time you realized you were different from the
18 gender you were assigned at birth?
- 19 EC: I have a very distinct memory of that.
- 20 AJ: Really?
- 21 EC: Very . . . well, let me tell you two stories. The first is . . . so we lived in this very rural, very white,
22 very working class town and one of the things that happened every year was there was this fund
23 raiser for the volunteer fire department in the gym at the local junior high that was a
24 combination of a fair and talent show and gags. So the Man-eating Fish with the janitor eating
25 tuna out of the can. There was a water . . . you know, throw sponges at the volunteer fire
26 department, that kind of thing. So the year I was . . . I must have been 10 or 11, there was a
27 woman who was new to town who didn't yet know my family, who was drawing cartoon
28 portraits. I must have had a dollar or two of allowance money and spent a dollar to sit down
29 and have my portrait drawn. She was doing three-minute sketches.
- 30 AJ: Caricatures?
- 31 EC: Right, caricatures basically. So I brought it home – I liked it, I'm amazed that I liked it – but I
32 liked it. And then the next week my mom came home with a story of me and this artist at the
33 grocery store. So remember this is a town of 1000 and everyone knows my family because my
34 dad taught at the high school. My mom's story is we got talking and the artist, whose name is
35 Betsy, said . . . they were talking about kids and families and finally the artist, Betsy, said to my
36 mom, "Didn't I draw your son last week?" And my mom said, "No, my son is a one-year-old."
37 And Betsy was like, "I think I drew your son last week." And then they concluded that Betsy was
38 talking about me. I was so happy about that story. I was delighted by that story and I knew
39 enough to say nothing about the way I was happy. Then I went back to the portrait and every

- 1 time I looked at the portrait, I'm looking at me as a boy and it made me so happy. It made me
2 so happy.
- 3 AJ: So you were 10 or 11?
- 4 EC: Yes. And the second story is a year or two later. I would go to my sister and say, "Do I look like a
5 boy or a girl?" Completely not sure, completely unsure.
- 6 AJ: Wow. What was her response?
- 7 EC: I have no idea, I have no idea.
- 8 AJ: Wow. So that was sort of the beginnings of this recognition that something about this gender
9 identity is not quite how I look but it's making me happy.
- 10 EC: Yeah.
- 11 AJ: What terms do you use to describe yourself today?
- 12 EC: I use the word gender queer. So I do a lot of speaking and training and teaching all over the
13 country. I'm a writer and my writing has led me to that work and to introduce myself in that
14 work I say that I'm a white disabled gender queer who lives in the green mountains of Vermont.
- 15 AJ: That's a pretty long introduction. How has that changed over time?
- 16 EC: So, after those early gender experiences that I just talked about, I buried that recognition gender
17 by coming out as a lesbian – like being a dyke was a way of being a woman. So I came out as a
18 dyke, felt like that was a way of being a woman and spent 15 years in the lesbian community
19 without a whole lot of awareness about gender other than being "sir" and "son" and "young
20 boy" some of the time. And unlike other . . . that happens to dykes, and particularly butch
21 dykes. There's often discomfort or anger about it. For me, there was never discomfort or anger,
22 it's just what happened. But there wasn't a lot of other self-awareness about gender. So for a
23 lot of years I called myself a dyke. I came out in 1982, so came out in the time where butch
24 femme was not a thing that the lesbian community was embracing at all, but as that started to
25 change I very much started using the language butch - butch dyke, butch lesbian, but more dyke.
- 26 AJ: And you use that consciously, I'm noticing – dyke versus lesbian. Was that a political choice?
- 27 EC: Yes – very much. Part of that reclaimed language – we're going to use the language that
28 specifically has been used to hurt us in a way of reclaiming, of making sure that language isn't
29 going to be used against us because we're using it ourselves. Also, I had this . . . like I was really
30 political in terms of having kind of this radical social justice vision of the world. You notice I
31 didn't come out into Gay, Inc. And it also . . . dyke had some connections to working class
32 culture and although that's not where I came out, I came out in college. I got a scholarship and I
33 got the hell out of this white, really conservative, very small town – thankfully I got out. But still,
34 a lot of connection with working class community, so I think that's another part of how dyke
35 resonated for me.
- 36 AJ: Wow.

- 1 EC: And this was years before the word queer became a reclaimed word. That happened in what?
2 The early 1990s.
- 3 AJ: Mid-1990s, I would say. It was very . . . underground. It was not as . . . sort of common
4 nomenclature as it is now.
- 5 EC: So dyke is almost an earlier version of queer.
- 6 AJ: I like this idea that you talked about around reclaiming language. I'm curious how you feel
7 about the word tranny.
- 8 EC: Yeah. I think some words get reclaimed and that others do not. There is no logical sense to
9 which words become reclaimed by whom and which words don't. The word queer is not
10 universally embraced by LGBT folks and so there is no logic in terms of which words are
11 reclaimed and then no real logic to which people within which communities embrace that
12 language. The word tranny . . . you know, in trans masculine community, for a while the word
13 tranny . . . I don't know, in the mid-1990s and very early 2000s, sounded a little like a word of
14 affection and reclaimed language. And that marked such a divide between trans women or
15 trans feminine people and trans masculine people. Trans women and trans women of color
16 have been so clear that there's no way to reclaim the word tranny. So the trans masculine
17 community that I'm connected to, there is such . . . not exclusively, but there is some vague
18 intention. But one of the strong strands is that we are not reclaiming that word because we're
19 being told loud and clear that it cannot be reclaimed. To return a moment to disability, the
20 word – and I'm going to now say a word that is full of hate, so this is a heads up.
- 21 AJ: OK, thank you.
- 22 EC: The word retard has never been reclaimed . . .
- 23 AJ: Never.
- 24 EC: . . . by disabled people. And it's a word I heard once a day, at least once a day when I was a kid.
25 It was one of the words that was used against me and was accompanied by rocks and fists. But
26 it's a word that I know no one who has reclaimed the word retard. And yet some of us in the
27 disability community have reclaimed the word cripple – we call each other crip. So what words
28 get reclaimed and by whom and why . . . but how much we have to respect the people who are
29 the primary targets of those words – which gets back to tranny, because it's never been trans
30 masculine people who've been the primary targets of the word tranny. It's been trans women
31 and it's been trans women of color.
- 32 AJ: Yeah. That's a very interesting analysis. I personally am a reclaimer of the term and maybe . . . I
33 think it's generational. I came out of a sort of . . . I came out in sort of a drag community
34 because those were the only spaces that really embraced transgender women. And even
35 though that language was really just on the verge of becoming popular, tranny usually referred .
36 . . when I was first . . . it was transsexuals, and it was a term sort of endearment. It was a term
37 of affection within the community. And, in fact, I rarely heard it as a term of disaffection until it
38 became sort of co-opted into mainstream culture and, "hot tranny mess."
- 39 EC: Right.

- 1 AJ: That's when I first started hearing it – sort of as this derogatory kind of thing. I know that so
2 many young trans-identified women, and particularly women of color, feel . . . I should just go
3 back and say that it was popularized in porn culture as well, right?
- 4 EC: Absolutely. That's my understanding. To go back to that conversation we were having before
5 you turned the camera on around the archive and about what was in the archive about trans
6 folks.
- 7 AJ: Yeah. So people reject the term because they don't want to be objectified. I absolutely believe
8 and respect the fact that people say they were beaten up and that word was used to denigrate
9 them. But I still feel some positive connections to the term in some ways. So it's interesting, as
10 you say, what words get reclaimed, by whom and for what purposes.
- 11 EC: And it makes me think so much of reclaimed language as insider language – how the language
12 inside particular communities can be really different from outside the community. You say
13 tranny inside particular communities to particular people is different from me saying the word
14 tranny – that's different from some cis white man saying the word.
- 15 AJ: Right, yes. Absolutely.
- 16 EC: And all of those contexts are really important.
- 17 AJ: They all matter.
- 18 EC: Absolutely.
- 19 AJ: What challenges have you faced since you began to express your true gender identity?
- 20 EC: The answer to that question . . . there's a line, like the challenges were one thing before
21 transition and another thing since transition. And the difference is that since transition I'm read
22 as one gender very consistently as I move through the world and it's the first time in my life that
23 I've been read as one consistent gender in the world.
- 24 AJ: I would imagine that's a positive thing.
- 25 EC: That is positive and it's such a surprise. I'm 12 years into that experience and it still is surprising
26 me every day when I'm "he" and "sir" everywhere I go. So the challenges before transition were
27 about some street harassment . . . pronouns just flying in the decade before I transitioned. I'd
28 be "he" on one street corner and "she" on the next street corner and "it" on the third street
29 corner and it depended on which way the wind was blowing. It had no connection to me.
30 Sometimes I'd be in rooms, in queer community or at work, and I'd be she on one end of the
31 room and he on the other end of the room. I have a really garden variety history with women's
32 restrooms. I was never arrested and I was never hauled out of a women's restroom, but I was
33 laughed out of women's restrooms, I was taunted in women's restrooms, I was questioned in
34 women's restrooms and that's really what drove me to the men's room – because men are not
35 paying attention to each other in men's room.
- 36 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 37 EC: And so the consequences can be really high when caught in the men's room as not a cis man.
38 The consequences if caught are really high but the chances of being called on that are very low

- 1 compared to the women's room – where women are policing. Well, policing isn't exactly the
2 right word but women are very . . .
- 3 AJ: Attuned.
- 4 EC: Attuned, and there are reasons for that attunement, but there also is a lot of bullshit in that
5 attunement.
- 6 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 7 EC: Many times women were not reacting to me in ways that say, "I'm scared." So there was stuff
8 about the women's restroom. Employment was pretty OK for me. I had jobs where I didn't get
9 fired or my supervisors witnessed a lot of gender stuff, but I was never fired. All the
10 employment stuff I've faced is about disability, not gender. Finding work as a disabled person
11 has been like pulling teeth. So were the challenges. And then there were challenges being part
12 of the dyke community. For a long time lesbians did not . . . just fierce, fierce, fierce tension
13 around transition. So one of the barriers to transitioning was that being part of this community
14 was so important and losing it felt so untenable to me. And what changed was like I'm not fed
15 enough by this community, the longer I knew myself as trans the more I was not being fed by
16 the lesbian community. So those were the challenges before transition. The challenges since
17 transition, there are mainly fewer challenges since transition – and some of that is about . . . the
18 word passing doesn't express what's happening but it's the language we have and it's the
19 language we have to talk about this really important experience and how some of us get to slide
20 through the world and some of us don't. It's very important to know that difference. So I'll use
21 the word passing, even though that word doesn't express half . . . you know?
- 22 AJ: Yeah.
- 23 EC: But I pass in the world, except on the phone. I don't pass on the phone at all, but again that's
24 my disability and I'd much rather be understood on the phone than . . . but in the world I'm read
25 as a white guy and part of the ease for me now is I'm consistently one gender, that gender,
26 although not an intensely . . . not a perfect match with my internal sense of gender, is closer
27 than woman ever was. And, white is a really important part of that. White is a really . . . and
28 that's why when people ask me about my gender, I talk about being a white guy in the world. I
29 never just talk about being a guy in the world. It almost feels like the gender is a white guy – the
30 gender isn't just guy. White is not just an adjective that describes a noun.
- 31 AJ: Right, it is the noun.
- 32 EC: Right, it is the noun. Those two words combined to make one gender identity. So there are
33 many fewer challenges and yet . . . locker rooms are a challenge. Navigating . . . I'm someone
34 who is really out, part of the leverage of my writing. If I wanted to be stealth, I don't know what
35 I would have to do if that was something I wanted.
- 36 AJ: I'm sorry, if you . . .
- 37 EC: Wanted to be stealth.
- 38 AJ: Stealth – yes.

- 1 EC: Right. I would have to change my name and never refer to 25 years of writing. That's not
2 something I want. So I'm really out but even with that, there are the daily challenges of how do
3 I talk about having the first 15 or 20 years of my adult life as a lesbian. What do I do with new
4 friends, when do I come out? That sort of stuff. I am lucky in my relationship. I'm in an
5 incredibly trans positive relationship so I've not had any relationship struggles.
- 6 AJ: You are just winning.
- 7 EC: Yes – yes.
- 8 AJ: Which feels like a really . . . I don't know, certainly non-observant thing to say because one of
9 the things that you have talked about is that your physical disabilities have really been more of
10 the focus of your challenges in life. So, I'm really interested . . . and I've got a whole set of
11 questions here, but I'm really interested in this intersection and intersections of identities that
12 transgender people live with on a daily basis – but interested in hearing about it from your
13 perspective, from your personal perspective as a trans person living with disabilities. And then,
14 more broadly because I'm pretty sure you think about how other intersections – like race or
15 class, really factor into trans identity as well.
- 16 EC: Yes. So, your question about barriers, I took a really long time to transition. I knew fairly early
17 that transition was attractive. In the early 1990s, I saw Leslie Feinberg and went to my first
18 Pride. It was right after *Stone Butch Blues* when she/he came out. She/he wasn't out yet but I
19 think Minnie Bruce was reading from the manuscript and they did this beautiful reading – just
20 beautiful, beautiful, beautiful reading. And I knew from that moment, that opened the door. I
21 knew from that moment that transition of some sort was attractive. And that took . . . I didn't
22 start medical transition for nine or ten years. One of the challenges was that I had spent so
23 much of my childhood dealing with doctors – that first memory I talked about a half-hour ago, of
24 doctors and doctors having complete control of my body, complete authority about who I was
25 and that authority carried many, many risks with it. I've spent my entire life working to love my
26 disabled body exactly as it is. From the time I was six years old, people were asking me, "If there
27 was a hypothetical cure pill for cerebral palsy would you take it?"
- 28 AJ: Wow, and what was your response?
- 29 EC: Well the assumption is that I would say, "Yes, of course, without hesitation – in a heartbeat." I
30 don't know exactly what I said to that as a child but my answer to that from the time I was 15 or
31 16, long before I had any disability politics, long before I understood about internalized
32 depression and shame, long before I was done aching to be normal, I was saying, "No, because I
33 have no idea who I'd be without this specific body, without my shaking hands, without my
34 slurred speech." That's my answer today, "I have no idea who I'd be without this specific body."
35 And so, really it's not an exaggeration to say, "I've spent my whole life working to love my
36 disabled body exactly as it is and resisting a lot of cultural and medical pressure to change my
37 body." So I get an articulated trans identity, I get to this attractive thing called gender transition
38 and I'm suddenly faced with this really huge contradiction. I've worked all this time to love my
39 disabled self exactly as I am and then here I am wanting to use medical technology to change my
40 gendered and sexed body. And that took me a decade to figure out. It was like, "What the hell
41 is that about?" If self-love is important as we are, I need to do that in terms of gender and I

1 couldn't. That took a long, long time to work out. And then it took a long time to be like, "If I
2 make this choice it means making a pretty intense choice to be connected to doctors." I had
3 spent a lot of years without health insurance, I spent a lot of years avoiding doctors, I spent a lot
4 of years dealing with disability bullshit in exam rooms. Go to the doctor for bronchitis or flu or
5 whatever, and the first thing they want to know about is CP and it's like . . . I know dozens of
6 trans people with the same story around gender. You go into the doctor for appendix and what
7 they want to know is what your genitals look like or how long you've been on estrogen or
8 testosterone or . . . whatever. But trans identity and the experience become the focal point
9 whether that's the medical issue or not. So it took me a long time to be like, OK – I'm going to
10 make these choices that connect me closely with doctors. So those have been some of the
11 places of pretty intense connections for me between disability and transness. You know, the
12 thing I hear in community, with some regularity, and I don't know whether this is in the trans
13 feminine community, but in trans masculine communities among folks who have used medical
14 transition or medical technology for gender transition or who want to . . . there's this train of
15 thought that says, "My transness is a birth defect that needs to be cured and I deserve good
16 medical . . ."

17 AJ: Access.

18 EC: ". . . access, just like disabled people have good medical access."

19 AJ: How do you feel about that?

20 EC: It makes me incredulous. This assumption that disabilities somehow equals good access to
21 health care and equals respectful health care and that is so far from true I can't even express it.
22 I could spend all day telling stories and citing statistics about how the exact opposite is true and
23 yet there's this train of thought, not overall but one train of thought, that leverages this
24 hypothetical thing about health care and disability to get health care for gender transition. It
25 also assumes this thing about birth defect. And defect is a word I've heard all my life in one way
26 or another. The assumption that we all want our defects fixed goes back to that hypothetical
27 cure. So for me . . . let me back up. I work really hard to respect every single way each trans
28 person identifies our relationship to gender, gender identity, gender expression and our
29 transness. I've come to understand that for some people being trans is a birth defect and is a
30 disability. I want to respect that and yet the assumption that defect leads to cure reinforces
31 some of the crap I've spent my entire life struggling with. And for me, being trans is not
32 anywhere near defect . . . and I know there are many, many different relationships to being
33 trans.

34 AJ: Wow. Yeah, because in many ways I mean, based on the narrative that I'm hearing, your trans
35 identity has really, in many ways, made life more accessible for you?

36 EC: Made life plentiful, made life possible in a way of expressing myself as whole. Yeah.

37 AJ: Yeah – which is fantastic. Boy, you started out . . . well, we just had this long conversation about
38 medical technology and trans identity, so to the extent that you feel comfortable sharing, Eli,
39 have you experienced any medical interventions in your gender transition?

1 EC: Yes. I had top surgery in 2002. And that's what I spent a decade figuring out compounded by
2 how am I going to do that – part of that was money, part of that is navigating doctors. It was a
3 very, very, very good thing to do. I can remember being nine-years-old, having my shirt off
4 outside, my mother ordering me to put my shirt on right now. So for me, chest reconstruction
5 surgery was the connection right back to that nine-year-old. A really good thing for me to do,
6 really hard thing to navigate into . . . like for a long time it was just like, "Where am I going to get
7 \$8000?" Eight thousand dollars seemed like . . . flying to the moon seemed more possible than
8 having \$8000. But I was able to . . . yeah, I had a boss who insisted on my doing a promotion
9 and that promotion I saved every single penny from that promotion for four years. So top
10 surgery was a really, really good thing that gave me so much more access to my body. I was not
11 . . . I had no idea how much access it would give me, like inside myself not even talking about
12 what it means on the street – just inside myself. At that point, I thought that top surgery would
13 be enough, that I didn't really want to be on testosterone for a number of reasons. It wasn't,
14 once I had top surgery, testosterone started shouting in my ear, shouting at me every single day.
15 Two of my best friends were three years into F to M transition and so I was watching them and
16 watching them with envy and with respect and with, "I want this," "I don't want this." But after
17 top surgery, testosterone just wouldn't leave me alone. And so finally . . . it wasn't a proactive,
18 "I'm choosing hormone replacement therapy," but it was a, "I've got to try this and it might not
19 be right but the only thing left is for me to try this." And it was the right thing.

20 AJ: Wow. You're in a beautiful relationship.

21 EC: I am.

22 AJ: You described it . . . talk a little bit about your sexual orientation. Are you in a heterosexual
23 relationship right now?

24 EC: Right.

25 AJ: And how has it been navigating relationships?

26 EC: Well, in the trans community we have this politics that says gender identity is here and sexual
27 orientation is here and they're really different things and don't confuse them. My experience is
28 that they're not the same thing but they're here . . . they're . . .

29 AJ: Yeah, they're not disconnected.

30 EC: They're not disconnected at all. So I came out as a lesbian when I was 18-years-old and I found I
31 was attracted exclusively to women. That felt really right. I spent a lot of years there and the
32 moment trans stuff came up, that was a new question. The moment trans stuff came up it's
33 like, "Oh, it's more complicated than that." "Oh, I've been attracted to butchs my entire life,
34 and butchs of a variety of gender identities." But I had submerged that when I came out as a
35 lesbian as . . . and so as gender opened up, sexuality and sexual orientation opened up and as I
36 have more access to my body, sexuality kept opening up. I'm currently in a relationship with a
37 trans man and that relationship . . . we move through the world as gay men, there's no question
38 about that. Internally we bring so many different kinds of history with us that I'm not sure what
39 . . . we've never sat down and said, "Inside the relationship, what kind of relationship is it?"
40 That said, I don't have my primary queer and trans connection, community questions, aren't

1 with gay male community. I've spent some time in the gay male community but that's not
2 where my primary connections are, that's not where I find political sustenance, cultural
3 sustenance, comfort. That's in a wider queer and trans community where the lines are much
4 looser. What else? So when we were filling out the paperwork and you asked me about sexual
5 orientation, wanting that one-word answer . . . I don't know. I don't have a one-word answer,
6 that's part of why queer is so lovely. Now part of who I'm attracted to is like all over, just all
7 over. And that's something that loosened . . . it either loosened up or it changed during
8 transition. I don't know which one.

9 AJ: Wow, fascinating. I'm just recognizing the time. I guess . . . you've sort of alluded to some of
10 this, but what do you think the relationship is between the LGB and the trans community?

11 EC: That is such an important and deep question and that goes so deep into the history and
12 detentions and pain and progress and what . . . yeah, it makes me think about Stonewall and
13 whose version of history gets listened to about Stonewall and the rebellions before Stonewall,
14 that kind of Compton Street Cafeteria.

15 AJ: Yeah.

16 EC: And I forget the name of the lunch counter rebellion in Philadelphia.

17 AJ: Right, yes. Boy, I can't recall the name either, but yes there was an action, long before
18 Stonewall even, that was led by trans . . . or they didn't necessarily identify themselves as trans
19 but certainly queers and drag queens and sort of people who were on the margins of the gay
20 community, if you will.

21 EC: Right. So some of my understanding is that there has always, always, always been so much
22 gender variance and gender non-conformity within gay and bi communities, or what we would
23 now call lesbian, gay and bi communities. There's always been this high level of gender
24 variation and there's a way in which it feels like the last 15 or 20 years a lot of that gender
25 variation has been pushed into T. And the T part ought to be T. And, at the same time, all of
26 this tension between the cis gender, non-trans LGB folks and trans folks. Some of the
27 connection that there are lots of trans folks who are also lesbians, gay, bi – some of the
28 connection is that there is then, and still remains, a lot of gender variation among lesbian, gay,
29 bi folks that don't necessarily name themselves as trans. Politically I think about kind of that
30 move in the late 1980s or early 1990s when trans communities started to have louder collective
31 voices and that happened at different times and different places around different specific trans
32 communities.

33 AJ: Stone Butch Blues, Transsexual Menace . . .

34 EC: Yes. I think about Susan Stryker's documentary about the Compton Street Cafeteria and the
35 incredible community of trans feminine women, trans women, and drag queens in the
36 Tenderloin. But as trans voices became more collective and stronger and less isolated in little
37 pockets, that decision to connect ourselves to what the gay and lesbian and bisexual, you know
38 – the B of LGBT, having its own long history. But that decision for trans folks politically to
39 connect with the lesbian and gay movement, I've heard so much debate about was that a good
40 thing, was that a bad thing. I kind of strategically feel like it was a very important decision. It

1 gave trans people a degree of political infrastructure that would have taken decades to build
2 from the ground up. And yet, it's cost us so much too. All the struggle, all the transphobia that
3 we have encountered among non-trans or cis gender lesbian, gay and bi people has been
4 intense. The ways we've been kicked out of non-trans lesbian and gay space. I think of the
5 Michigan women's festival and trans women, I think of the struggle that trans women have who
6 are lesbian or bi-identified in terms of just finding people to date – tremendous, tremendous
7 pain, tremendous struggles. So it's not just political struggle, it's also really, really personal
8 struggle. I think of the kind of ferocity of radical feminists against trans people – trans women in
9 one way and trans men in another way and how ugly that's been. There's been so much
10 transphobia we've dealt with among non-trans lesbian and gay people. It's like . . . how ugly gay
11 male communities have been about both trans women and about trans men in really different
12 ways. Sometimes it's like it hasn't been worth the political infrastructure and strategy to decide
13 to do this funny amalgamation of the LGBT. I don't know. I don't know.

14 AJ: (Doorbell). You know, that's Ben. I just saw him walk up. This has been such a fascinating
15 conversation. I hope that we can, at some point in time, talk again. I don't want to say
16 continue, because we've covered so much here that it's been a pure joy and a blessing.

17 EC: Exactly. Thank you so much.

18 AJ: But there is so much more to discuss.

19 EC: Thank you so much.

20 AJ: Thank you, Eli. I appreciate your willingness to be a part of this.

21 EC: Absolutely.

22 AJ: Until we meet again, my friend.

23 EC: And thank you for doing this oral history. Oral history is so important. Histories vanish so
24 quickly.

25 AJ: Absolutely. Thank you.