NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DEAN SPADE

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #001

Transcribed by Jamie Magyar (volunteer)

Nadia Awad: It is April 24, 2017, and I'm just here with Dean Spade, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, doing an oral history with him for the New York Trans Oral History Project, which seeks to document the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming New Yorkers, so—okay—let's start. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born, and what that place was like?

Dean Spade: I was actually—I was born in San Diego, but my family only lived there for like, the few months I was born there, so I don't really know what it's like.

Awad: So where did you move afterwards?

Spade: Then we moved back to the Bay Area, where they had been living, and then, when I was three, my mom moved my sister and brother and I to Vancouver for like nine months, and then we moved to Albemarle County, Virginia, and that's where I actually grew up.

Awad: So what was it like growing up in Virginia at that time?

Spade: We lived in a rural area, we lived in a small, like, the village we lived in was called Batesville, it's just like a general store and a post office that was at the back of it and then later like kind of on the side of it—what was it like? Just very small, and rural, and…. What else is there to say about it? So many things…

Awad: Was it a big town, or….?

Spade: No. I mean just like—it's like thirty minutes from Charlottesville, so there's like, a bigger town there, and like maybe thirty minutes from like Staunton and Waynesboro, but it was just kind of like, country, like, you know, you just run around in the grass with your shoes off and hope that someday somebody will take you to town to do something exciting but it feels like it never happens. You know what I mean? Just, like, very country living, you know, like some people who live around us don't have indoor plumbing, you know, like some of the kids I went to school with—a lot of them were living in, like, trailers without plumbing, or people didn't have phones, like that was really normal, like in my elementary school. And there was like a migrant farmworker community also in the area, because it's like apple and peach orchard area, and, yeah, I mean my—it's an area in like—I think like, race and class really defined my childhood understandings of the world, so like we went to the elementary school that had been the black elementary school, we all knew it had been the black elementary school and most of the teachers were black, that was like—that was an understood thing, and then I went to a middle school that merged different elementary schools, and when you went to that middle school, like it was very clear, like, the people coming from the other elementary schools, some of them were like, more upper-class people, you know, who lived in areas that looked more like suburbia, and less like, rural, even though it's kind of all "out there." And, yeah, like one thing I talk about sometimes to describe what the environment was like—you know, it's the 1980's, in rural Virginia, but we live so far out there's no cable TV, and so we're not really seeing, like, the subcultures people define in the 80's, it's kind of like people are still living the way they've lived there for longer. There's not like punks, or skaters, or the kinds of things that people associate with 80's that—our schools, the cliques and stuff were more like, just about race and class. It was like, black, white, redneck, prep, you know, just like these kind of stories. And like, my high—the school bus that took me to my middle school and high school was race segregated, like, black kids had to sit in the back of it. It was just like, the rules on the bus. It was like, supposedly to

prevent fighting, and like, our school cafeteria was kind of a strict black-white divide, that like, people didn't cross—you know know it just was, it's like we were very much still living in the—a lot of the meanings and structures of like the apartheid regime that had ended really recently, and that had been resisted in our county, like it was kind of like—where they closed the schools so they didn't have to integrate, and all of that was like, fresh, and not—and everyone was still making that happen in ways that were different than the ways that it happened before the laws changed, but that was like, in the air in a hardcore way.

Awad: Do you have a sense at all of why your mom chose to move back to this town after being in San Diego and the Bay and sort of, places that are closer to cities and maybe a little bit more multi-culti, or….?

Spade: Yeah, yeah. Well, so my mom was—she was born in St. John, New Brunswick, in Canada, she grew up very working class, didn't graduate from high school, none of her siblings did, just like, you know, they all quit school to work in factories and stuff like that. And then she like, left there and, part of the reason she left there was because she like, got pregnant, and got kicked out, and like ended up living in Toronto and whatever. Her life changed drastically and she ended up moving at some point, with like a boyfriend, to California, when she was, you know, young, whatever. And she—she was living in San Francisco, in like the 60's and 70's, and was kind of hippie, you know what I mean? Like, not like—I think she was a little older than what the real center of the hippie scene was, but she was very influenced by—she was like, into, like, you know, New Age ideas, you know what I mean? This kind of thing. But also like, somebody who didn't have a high school degree, you know? Anyway, she—people she knew from San Francisco moved to this area in Virginia, and that was why she moved there. And so there was like, part of her friendship community that was those people, and a lot of them were, like, more upper-class than her, like generally, like they moved there but a lot of them actually like were professionals, whereas my mom was like… She worked at a glass and mirror shop, she worked, like, doing something with old folks, like, we were on welfare a lot of the time, and so it was kind of complicated, because I think like, a lot of the people who moved there to be part of that community, they sent their kids to private school and stuff like that, but we ended up having just kind of a rural Virginia lifestyle. So she moved there to be part of this community—and also because she was a single mom and wanted to find a community of people, you know, to help support her raising her kids and that—and it had not worked out in Vancouver and she felt like she hadn't had people there, but she—she was an alcoholic, and her—the people in our community, that she had moved there to be with, like, forced her into rehab at one point and stuff, so basically her relationships with them fell apart. So even though she moved there to be part of that, in the end I would say it didn't work out for us. Like we ended up, just like, in rural Virginia community. She was—she did have really meaningful friendships with some of those people. She got sick with cancer when I was thirteen and for the year that she was sick before she died, you know, those people brought us food and stuff like—it was like, complicated relationships with like people from that community, that were, to some degree, supportive, and to some degree, conflictual, like, because my mom was going through all this shit related to her alcoholism. Like, there was a whole period where she like, lost her driver's license from DUIs, and like, you can't really get around in that area without a driver's license. There was just like, a lot of stress, and like, simultaneously I'm grateful for some of the support that people gave her and also I'm—it became very clear to me that there was a major class divide in between my mom and these people, and that they were having a different experience of moving to this beautiful area in Virginia than like, this person who was—who had moved

her kids to like, a place that, like, you know, did not offer us the best—you know, some of the things we might've had if we'd stayed in San Francisco, or something like that. But I think that what she was seeking in choosing that move was this kind of community and support.

Awad: And when you say "us," you're referring to you and a sibling, or...?

Spade: Yeah, I have an older brother, who's like six years older than me, and an older sister who's like, three years older than me.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about your dad?

Spade: Yeah, my dad—he and his family left—they're Jewish and they left Germany in 1938 when he was four and his siblings were all older than him, so like they left with four kids, on a boat, and came to the United States, you know, obviously because of the Holocaust, and lost a lot of whatever they had going there. And when he—when they arrived, and lived in—they settled in the Bay Area, and his dad committed suicide and his mom was institutionalized. So my dad was like, you know, he had a lot of kids and couldn't take care of them, is basically the deal. He just has a—he couldn't—he was kind of like high-functioning, he was kind of like a charming person, but like didn't have his stuff together, and.... A loving, kind, friendly, cheerful type of dissociative, you know what I mean? Like, anyway, so yeah, I didn't grow up with him, and didn't—I don't—you know, don't have that kind of parental experience of like, living with someone and that kind of thing. I think my parents stopped living together before I turned one, so I don't have that relationship with him, and like when my mom died, he was, I think like living in a YMCA because he'd gotten divorced from his next wife, and was basically homeless. And so I didn't live with him when my mom died, I lived with foster parents instead, in Virginia, and he lived in California my whole life. He just died, like a year and a half ago. So yeah, he was like a interesting person, but not a parent, really, to anybody.

Awad: So—and let me know if you ever want to like, take a break, or something, I know I might be bringing up like—

Spade: It's okay.

Awad: —difficult stuff, so we can always take a break if it's like, you need a break or whatever. So, you're growing up in rural Virginia, with your siblings, with kind of, you know, varying levels of social resources, it sounds like. Emotionally, economically, et cetera. I'm wondering—you had mentioned that you had an awareness of—kind of a deep awareness of race and class because of the school system—I'm wondering if you could give me a sense of what your thoughts or impressions regarding like, gender was when you were a kid, growing up in that context.

Spade: Yeah, that's a good question, I mean—

Awad: Or messages.

Spade: Yeah, I mean—I definitely, like, the big gender moment for me really was like, more like when I was around fourteen or fifteen. I had some realizations about sexism, you know, where I was just like, seeing what was going on around me regarding like, you know, girls getting labeled as sluts if they made out, or had sex, and like—you know, I was seeing just like, late middle school, early high school

dynamics, and listening to Salt-N-Pepa, and I had this like, major realization about sexism because of Salt-N-Pepa, and then like very dramatically in the middle of the night, like, thinking about the song, like getting up in the middle of the night at my friend's house and like writing down all my thoughts about sexism.

Awad: What song was it?

Spade: "Tramp." And so, that's kind of like, you know, an important moment for me, but before that, you know, so my mom like, my mom always had like short hair, she didn't shave her legs, she was—she was not—I wouldn't say that she like, said anything feminist or was—she wasn't really political. She told us that racism was wrong, like, when there was all this racist stuff constantly being said around us, she was like, that's not right, you're not allowed to say that. Like she clearly had like, a—her politics was influenced by the fact that she'd spent the 60's and 70's in California, and like, she—I don't know what the depths of her political awareness were, but she had some clarity around that, and she—I remember her talking about how she, like, hated Reagan because he was bad for poor people and old people and that's what she cared about, you know what I mean? So like, I had a sense, obviously, that we were like, not Republicans, which was a big deal in my elementary school and middle school, so like, you know, I had that divide with my friends or whatever. And—yeah, like then so I always had like a—and she had a bumper sticker that said "Question Authority," like there was a, you know, there was—she had a kind of, like, she said "fuck" a lot, and she had a like, a "fuck you" to like, cops, you know, whatever. And she had—she had friends that were people of color when that wasn't, like, wouldn't have been the norm for like, other white people's parents or whatever. But I don't—it wasn't like she gave me a political analysis, but I definitely, like, a strong memory I have is like her fighting, at this glass and mirror shop that she worked at for a period, that also, like, me and her—me and my mom and my sister would like, clean houses on the weekends together, when we would clean—we also cleaned the glass and mirror shop on the weekends. So we were all basically employed by this company, and it was like, the family was like a huge Christian family, and my mom was really pissed that she got paid less than the men, who did the same jobs. I think she was kind of like, a hyper-competent person, you know, who kind of, like, walk in anywhere and make herself indispensable, and then—so I remember, like, maybe helping her write this letter to them, about like, the fact that she wasn't getting paid the same. And their rationale was that men were breadwinners, and she was like, "I'm a single parent, what the fuck are you talking about?" you know, so I remember moments like that, about the fact that men got paid more, for sure. But I think that I didn't have a major political moment around gender until after she was dead and I was like, you know, starting high school and observing these sexist dynamics. And then I like, somehow openly got really curious about like—I don't know if I used the word feminism, but like that inequality of some kind, and like a teacher gave me the book, Susan Faludi's book Backlash, and I read that and it blew my mind—and she gave me The Handmaiden's Tale. And that was really wild for me. You know, I didn't know that like, lesbians and gay men existed, like I'd never heard of that, you know what I mean? There just was like—there was some level of like—maybe I, I probably had a sense of gay men because it's like a joke on TV, but definitely not, like, lesbians. You know, I was mostly just being a normal adolescent, I was like, wishing I had a different body, in a—not in a trans way, you know, or like wishing I was—imagining that if you—like I really believed in the romance myth from a young age, I was like, oh, if you—especially I think 'cause I was like, raised by an alcoholic, and a foster kid, and I was like missing a lot of emotional pieces, I imagined that you could get that through romance because that's what like, TV and every song said, you know? So I like, would have an obsessive crush on someone, but normal middle school things,

you know, coping mechanisms for dealing with what life is like.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like being a high school student there, with, you know, the sort of infusion of people that are from, you know, schools that are a little more resourced and, yeah?

Spade: I mean one thing that's really intense in the way that the schools worked then and there, and I mean everything's really different there now because there's like a zillion more people who live there than there in that area than there used to be, but like in elementary school, my best friend was this black girl named June, and it was like, because of the way—I don't understand—the way that the dividing lines happened where the white poor people lived, where I lived, I was going to go to a different middle school than June, she was going to go where the black poor people lived middle school, even though we'd gone to the black elementary school together, and then we were gonna come back in high school to all the same high school, and it's like, when I—the shift from elementary school to middle school was like, you're not allowed to be friends with black kids anymore. You know, like, the lines—and like, there was a story that I was told then, about how basically all the kids from my elementary school were tracked to not be in advanced classes in middle school because it's the black elementary school, and like my principal at my elementary school personally went to the middle school and said they had to let me in, to like, not the low track classes. And I feel very aware that he did that because I was white. You know? Like I don't know that he did that for any of the black kids who were in the—June and I were like, always getting the best grades, we were always like, she was better at several things than I was, but like, you know what I mean? Like, that's what we were doing together, and she didn't have the same path, and when we got back to middle school together, she wouldn't even say hi to me, and she didn't have a phone, so we couldn't stay in touch when we—a couple times she called me from her aunt's house, who had a phone, but like that was—it was just like, you can never—you cannot have these relationships, you cannot have—it just, the level of rules around—so there, for me that was like, very sad, and painful, and like, wild to like lose all the people I'd gone to school with for, since like, kindergarten, and then not be allowed to be friends with them when we saw each other again after these three years of middle school. Wait, what did you ask me? You asked me about going to high school—

Awad: High school, yeah.

Spade: Oh yeah, and then so I—my mom died, and I went—I, to some degree, until my mom died, I'd been doing this, like, thing that my brother and sister had done, which is like, clamor in that middle school to try to appear not to be poor, and to try to like, be friends with the kids who like, have stuff. And like, my brother like, really had dived into that, and like, you know, basically lived at his friends' houses and was almost never home, you know, like he just really, like, didn't want to be where we were from, and—basically, social climbing. And our mom was like, willing to help us do that, like she understood that like, you know, if we had to clean a lot of houses on the weekend so that we could have like, a new pair of shoes or something, whatever, she was like, "Yes," because she also was like social climbing—she was, you know, someone who'd married a person outside her class, and she had a sense of these things and like, was a survivor in that way, you know? So basically—I played that game basically until my mom died and then I think I guess I was just like devastated, and just like, "fuck this," and didn't want to do it anymore, and didn't want to hang out with those kids, and deal with all that shallow stuff, and like found a bunch of like, really nice boys who were stoners who like, also had had like, different obstacles in life, and like, I just hung out in a different scene after that, and just was like, I moved in with

these foster parents who were awful, and decided—I basically just wanted to get out of Virginia and like, leave this world. So I worked on skipping a year of high school. So I lived with the first foster parents for about a year and a half, and then lived with these other foster parents who were not abusive, which was awesome, but like, very different from me, in certain ways, but we've continued to have a good relationship, but they're like, just a—like, they had—they're, you know, southern people from West Virginia who also didn't go to high school and kind of like, really Christian, and just like very traditional "no sex before marriage" whatever, you know, they—I also didn't fit in their, you know, social world well, but they were like, very nice people who had known my brother when he was a kid, and known my mom, and knew that I was in a bad situation with the first foster parents and so they took me in. Basically, I just wanted to get out of the whole thing. And so—

Awad: May I just back up one minute? Can you talk a little bit about how you—how foster care came into the picture with your particular situation, if that's okay?

Spade: Yeah. I mean basically just that my—when my mom died, my dad was living in a shelter so I had to live somewhere else. So I had social security survivors' benefits, because my mom's—through my mom. And so I moved in with these people who I'd known when I was a kid, and who lived near me in that—in Batesville, in that small town or village or whatever—and even before I moved in with them, I knew I didn't want to live there, that they were really intense. I like, asked other people, I couldn't find anywhere else to live, so I moved in with them, and then I was like really not doing okay there. I don't know what all that looked like; I don't remember it that well. I remember some of the things they did but I don't remember like, what other people might've been seeing in me? But my brother, who generally I hadn't been close to, and who's really conservative, and we're just really different, somehow he saw that I was like, not okay there, and so he asked these other people, who, he'd known their son in high school, and they'd been best friends until my brother had sometimes stayed at their house all summer and like, worked for the dad who was like a, electrician or builder, you know, like they had really like, given him a lot of, kind of parenting. And that was more in line with his values. Yeah, he asked them if I could go stay with them.

Awad: So it was really—but it was, your brother was still a teenager—it was really, you know, your siblings and yourself trying to advocate for your own living situation, like I'm just curious about, you know, if the school got involved, if you had child services or any of that sort of thing if you could explain, or—if you remember.

Spade: Yeah, my brother was in college, he'd gone—yeah, to live in Blacksburg, Virginia, so the first foster family my sister and I—no, so child services didn't get involved. I never had clear legal guardianship after that. When I applied to go to college, I wanted to go to college in California because it was really far away from Virginia, and it was like, a place I'd heard of, you know? And I got in-state residency from my dad, because I hadn't—none of my foster parents had ever been my legal guardians, but social security had signed over, had signed them my survivor's benefits. I don't really know, actually, how that works, because all the kids I worked with as an adult that've been in foster care have been through, like, child services. I'm actually kind of surprised that they'll just send your social security survivor's benefits to whoever, but, yeah, I basically didn't have clear legal guardianship during that whole time. I mean, I wasn't aware of that, I just was trying to find places to live. Yeah, so, basically my brother arranged with these people to let me live with them, and I became really focused on skipping a year of high school, so I like, went to community college during high school, and I found out about this

thing at the Mississippi University for Women where like, you could like, apply to do a summer program, and it was free, and so I went into college classes in this horribly disgustingly hot, terrible town—Columbus, Mississippi—for a summer. You know? I just was like, trying to do anything I could to like, leave Virginia sooner, so, that is what I did.

Awad: And so what—can you talk to me a little bit about—so you're with the second foster family. Can you talk to me a little bit about how you then went from there to college, and how that—?

Spade: Yeah. So basically—yeah, I was a—I wanted to leave, and go far away. This stuff was actually, it wasn't the easiest thing to do there, like I think my sister got really screwed trying to figure out how to go to college because there was so little support for like, how to apply, or whatever. I found more support and found more help doing that from like, other people's parents and things like that. But basically, I ended up going to UC Santa Cruz when I left, I was like, I just want to get away as far as possible. My sister had stayed in Virginia, and she and I, like, got in a car and drove together, cross-country, actually with my boyfriend at the time, and we moved to California together, and she moved to the Bay Area and I moved to Santa Cruz. And my roommate was a lesbian. And she's still a dear friend of mine. And I was like, oh my god, I learned about this whole other world of like, gay people, and gay subculture, and they were like, "You already look gay!" I was like, "Really?" You know, just because like, things I had just come to myself, about like, cutting my hair off, or whatever, just my like, attempts at making my feminist statements in my very, like, limited resource world about what that would be, without like, internet, without like, you know, access to subcultures... I mean I literally remember like, going to the library at UC Santa Cruz and checking out a book about how to have lesbian sex. Like, so cute! Like, that's how you figured it out back then, I guess! The library. So yeah, I met these people, they were from LA—very sophisticated, in my view—you know, and they had, they knew what gay culture was, and 100%, introduced me to it and told me, you know, like what all the things were. So it was wonderful, to like—I remember going back home from—you know, going back home to visit, and hanging out with my high school best friend, [?????], who I now live with and is like, my sister to me, basically, and telling her. I was like, "This is what lesbianism is. You are gonna love this," and like, breaking it all down for her, telling her like, exactly what the sex involved, and exactly what all of it was, and she was like, "Oh," and like, whatever. That was very funny. Like literally recruiting her! Just because it was all new ideas, you know? Really cute. And just for me, I think it's like, it was just so freeing to actually find out about feminism, and to find out about—I think it was really freeing to me, having grown up in an environment steeped in a, just kind of basic form of sexism, like, the point of your body, is to like, look good in this way that boys like, and like the point of sex is like, not to seem like a slut, but to like, have the right amount of like—give the right amount that you keep a boy but not ever be a slut, and you shouldn't have sexual pleasure, and—I mean just, all this shame, all these stories, and then to find out about a whole another world of ideas, and to find out a better way to style my own body that wasn't for the consumption by a sexist society, like it was so freeing to me to find out about like a butch look, and to be like, open to being ugly, or even pursue being ugly, because also I had this kind of like round little face and people are like "oh, you look like a little angel!" you know? To just pursue being like, not available to that reading of my body was like, very much like a reclaiming experience, like my first experience with like feeling like I had a body or I had desire, or I had choice, like a—yeah, just occupying, like—ownership of my own experience in a different way.

Awad: And can you tell me a little bit about what happened next? Did you stay there?

Spade: I didn't stay at Santa Cruz. I think I just, you know, didn't really know what I was doing. But I felt—you know, I had been on my own for a while, like in high school I had, you know, felt like I was on my own, like I didn't have parents, I kind of did a lot of whatever I wanted, I had had plenty of time to try drugs and alcohol and sex and whatever else I wanted, and a lot of the kids at school at Santa Cruz, who I was living with in the dorm, were like, just out of the house and doing all that stuff for the first time, and didn't go to class. I was just like, "I don't care about this," I'm also personally paying for this, I'm going into debt, like, this—I want serious intellectual experience. Obviously, I think if I'd stayed there for longer I would've had that, because Santa Cruz is full of amazing, like, scholars, and—but I just, I just didn't realize that was the first year of college probably anywhere when you live in a dorm. I thought, "This isn't the right place for me." And so I applied to a bunch of schools, knowing now more than I had known before about kind of, how to apply to school and stuff like that, what college was, and I just—and I was looking on the east coast, I can't actually remember what different places I applied to, but I ended up deciding to go to Barnard because I got the most financial aid there. So that was just a, way that I could actually that was going to cost me less than going to Santa Cruz, and get to live in a big city, so like, not necessarily have to have my whole life only be about campus life, if it was—if it felt like not what I was into. I was ready to like—I had taken a class, at Santa Cruz, with Wendy Chapkis about queer something—queer history, or queer something—and like, had my mind totally blown, because obviously I was already really looking for politics, you know? I mean, I shouldn't say this, you know—I just had this conversation last night, with our mutual friend Morgan, you know, like I—at my middle school, we organized a sit-in, when I was eleven, about—they were firing a teacher and changing some program in the school, like I was interested in disruption and political pushback. There's was this whole thing where like, all the—they came in and they threatened that they would take away like, the end of the year celebration or whatever, if we didn't go back to our classes, and like, all the older kids left and just three of us sixth graders stayed and got suspended, and my mom was totally supportive of me in this and thought it was really great. You know, so I was shaped by, I think my mom's, you know, framework and whatever things I developed about a certain relationship to power. And so learning about queer politics and feeling these things I felt about feminism, and learning about these histories and the resistance—I mean, I remember reading Audre Lorde in that class—just, you know, learning these things I just was like, really ready to find ways to like, practice that and do that. And so the idea of going to New York City and going to Barnard and being like right in the middle of things seemed like very, you know, appealing.

Awad: So, may I just back up a little bit and ask: were you raised with any sort of—I know your mother was, seemed to have kind of a sense of injustice, and was really trying to advocate for herself within her own sphere and space, but I'm wondering if you were, you know, given how much of a revelation a lot of this feminist and queer thinking was to you in college, were you raised with any sort of religious or more conservative values, or had you internalized any of those as a youth growing up in Virginia?

Spade: I think I had very much internalized, like, the sexist environment, you know what I mean? I mean you know how like, sexism or any system of oppression works, it's like you simultaneously can see parts of it that you disagree with but also the other parts are like, working on you and you have your own forms of like, shame, and I think my mom had a lot of internalized stuff that she was also—there was a lot of shame in our household, and a lot of, like—I think, you know, she was a sexual abuse survivor—there was a lot despite her, you know, success at modeling a certain kind of like, rejection of authority. She also was, you know, caught in a lot of binds around like, shame and self-hatred, and, I mean,

alcoholism. So I think that simultaneously I had an idea, and like, an excitement, a spark, about resistance, but I had almost no models of what that looked like besides the most watered down version of something you might get at school, but we didn't even study—we didn't even study the Civil Rights movement in school. You know how that is, like just—what did we study?—we studied the Civil War over and over again, and like, you know, a hurricane that came through Virginia in 1956 or something, you know? Like, we worshipped Thomas Jefferson, constantly, that's like all we did in school. And so, to like—yeah, I think that I had a lot of unpacking to do, and she'd only done a small part of my raising, you know what I mean? Like, by the time I was like twelve going on thirteen, she was already very sick, so that's very young, you know. And most of my adolescence was just in this weird chaos of foster homes and, you know. So in learning what I could from my peers I think, a lot, and just from like the dynamics at school, which completely sucked, so—yeah, I think I had a lot of unpacking to do, I had—like what I had from her was like some kind of fighting spirit thing, which I also, now that I've gone back and tried to connect more with her birth family over the years, like, you know, they are very—they're all people who have almost no education, but they're very funny and smart and…. plucky, you know what I mean?

Awad: I was going to say plucky!

Spade: —but living in very immiserated conditions that are just, you know? Like just dying really young and being really sick, and addicted, and just really sort of stuck in certain situations, you know? But—but with a pretty surprising amount of spirit, yeah.

Awad: So you go to Barnard for your sophomore year…

Spade: I went there for—I don't know, the sophomore, and all that stuff doesn't really work because I'd gotten all that college credit trying to get out of high school, so—but I basically, I went to Barnard for two and a half years. I was also trying to get out of college as fast as I could so that I could not go into as much debt, because it was just all on me. On the one hand I got really good financial aid because I could prove I didn't have any actual parents, but on the other hand, you know, it was just me trying to deal with, like, living in New York City, even though it was awesome to have a dorm and stuff but just like—there was a lot of, like, really not having the basic things I needed was a pretty consistent theme. Yeah, so I went there, and like, while I was there I worked at the Barnard Center for Research on Women, took—I took classes from Ann Pellegrini that really impacted me, and introduced me to like, greater critiques of queer politics. I also was like, you know, trying to figure out how to work in this stuff, so I—what'd I do during college? I worked at A Different Light Bookstore, where I like, really was engaged with—like, the people who worked there were like an amazing cast of characters, like people who did sex work, and people who, like, organized in the nightlife and did party stuff, and people like, some—there were some graduate students at American Studies NYU, like, there was this range of people but it was very much not a gay mainstream. It was a lot of people who were in part—like different subcultures, different queer subcultures in New York City that were—that had shared critiques of Giuliani. And—

Awad: So this was in the 90's.

Spade: Yeah, so I started going to Barnard in like 1995, with my girlfriend from Santa Cruz, who like lived in the dorm with me, secretly, for an entire year, whatever. Wild. Anyway—so, yeah, I worked on campus also at the library, and, you know, I had to have a lot of jobs, obviously, to like, get by, and you know,

figure out things like—because if I was going to go home to Virginia to visit I had to buy the plane ticket myself. If I was going to, like, make a long distance call—like this was, I was a kid who was in college and didn't have parents, right? Like I had to figure out what I was going to do with myself whenever the dorms were closed, like, and just all that stuff that can make you need to figure out money stuff. My sister was living in California, I wanted to see her when I could, things like that. So I—I also had a period, I don't remember what the years were, I also had—so there was a period more towards the end of college where I was like, working at A Different Light and I was also working in the nightlife, I was like, a party promoter for Meow Mix, the lesbian bar on the Lower East Side, like I flyered, so I would—my job was both to, I would stand outside other dyke clubs and flyer but I would also like, go all over the like—to all these different other clubs and bring flyers for that bar but also sometimes for other parties, you know? So I had this kind of job and there was also like, a party called "Wow" that was promoted by someone named Tina something, and I would also promote her parties, so I was like—a lot of my life was, like, between this bookstore and then like late at night bringing all these flyers all over the city, and, I mean it's so funny, right now probably I guess people just use Facebook—to promote their parties or whatever, but—and then standing outside places and flyering, which was funny because I wasn't 21 but I, half of my whole life took place inside bars because back then, New York City, people didn't really ID. And I also was like pursuing Gay, Inc., I was like—during this period I interned at like GLAAD, and Lambda, and NGLTF, like I was—I wanted to know how—like so many college students—I wanted to know how political change worked and what you're told is that it works through that stuff, right? So I got internships at all those places, sometimes paid, sometimes not paid, and what a lot of them were working on was gay marriage. It was, you know, the Hawaii case had just happened, and there was—it was kind of the new, the beginning of the burst of the gay marriage stuff. So I was working on that, and feeling some, like—having some questions around it, because I also was a person who'd grown up on welfare, both my parents were immigrants, and immigration reform and welfare reform were also happening, and those orgs didn't—weren't doing anything about those things. And I was like, really, like, confused about that, so I was beginning to have some, like, critical questions about like what the strategies of those orgs were, but I was still working at them. And—sometime around this period I also got involved with an organization that was emerging that people I worked with at A Different Light were part of called Sex Panic, which was an organization that was like, responding initially to the rise of these, like, gay neocon figures, like Gabriel Rotello, Andrew Sullivan, Michelangelo Signorile, like putting forward this new framework around gay politics that was like, you know—gay people are to be more domesticated and all get married and are to blame for AIDS if they don't, and very pro-marriage, very pro-military, like this new kind of conservative gay politics frame, or this particular kind of like, media-bursting moment of it, was something that this group Sex Panic!, which had a lot of former ACT UP-ers in it, was forming around. So it was the kind of group that like, just met at the Center, it didn't have a budget or staff, it was like a very grassroots group. So I was like getting involved in that work, and that work was connected to broader—like that, people in that group were connected to broader anti-Giuliani work in a bunch of different realms. Like some people were really connected to like, the work against the zoning out of the sex industry in Times Square, some people were really connected to like, the stuff happening where like, there was a lot more police presence in Washington Square Park and on the piers, and there was like, cameras being put in place, and like rounding up of youth, and rounding up of people who had sex—had public sex in those parks. There was people who were like, linking that to stuff happening, like attacks on taxi drivers, and street vendors, there was just like a lot of work happening around the city generally about the ways that Giuliani's politics targeted, like, sub—like, vulnerable subgroups, right? And like how to bring these different targeted people who are being

criminalized in new ways together, even though they're, you know, like being—feeling different sides of this sword. And this was relevant to me especially because, like, I worked at Meow Mix, and we would get like, raided all the time by the fire marshals, because one of Giuliani's things is that he was trying to enforce the Cabaret Laws, and so that like—you could close—they would target, especially, like, queer and POC nightlife spaces and like, relentlessly have the fire marshals raid them and of course find all of the, you know, violations that every New York City business has, and then also like, ticket the bar if anybody's dancing, and all of this stuff—enforcing all these old laws, to try to like, shut down gay nightlife, it was being used to shut down like, sex work spaces, whatever. So all—people were doing organizing around all of this stuff, and it was like a major education for me, in like understanding policing, and understanding like, the complex racial and immigration dynamics in New York City. I mean I just learned about, you know, multi-issue, queer, anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics during this period, like this is what, like—and I was just busy running around, like, doing this nightlife work, doing this retail work, this gay retail work, you know, working at a bookstore obviously is like, amazing way to have—be surrounded by ideas, right, it's just like people there are talking about ideas, there's authors coming through, and that—those ideas ranged from like, the whole world of like sex how-to books, and like all the SM stuff and all the events like that to like, you know, really amazing fiction and, you know, poetry and that piece of it, to like political analysis and all of that was like—I was being influenced by all of that, and being influenced by these individual friends who worked at the store with me who each came from there like, own political issue, or take, or community, or life experience, and were making these connections between, like, you know, sex worker organizing and taxi driver organizing and you know—all of this different stuff that was threatened by Giuliani. So that was like, you know, I would go to these bigger meetings at like, Charas Community Center that used to exist on the Lower East Side, and just like all of these spaces where people were trying to bridge these communities attacked by Giuliani and like, build a united front in various struggles, and like have each other's backs and build solidarity between these struggles. So that was a lot that was happening during that period, and then I like, graduated from college in like December 1997, totally didn't have any money, very stressful, I like moved into this weird apartment in Boerum Hill with this guy—like, he just was renting a room but it was like you couldn't go to the floor where the bathroom was after 9PM, and like I eventually realized—and like, the doors were locked in a scary way, it was just a sketchy situation but I just didn't have any money and I didn't know what to do, like—I eventually realized he was like, looking into my room through a hole in the—my ceiling, in his floor, and it just, I had to get out, and these people took me in who I worked with at the bookstore. And I stayed with this person who was like—she was like a really intense alcoholic, she worked at the bookstore but she was also a graduate student and she was from money, and so I could like, live with her for next to nothing, but it was like—the downside was having to live with an alcoholic, and like, there was some sexual pieces of that, and it wasn't the best but it was like, I just needed a place to stay. You know? So it was a rough period for me, in terms of like, housing instability, and the vulnerabilities that come with that, and just trying to—yeah, to get by, and you know, live without the basic stability that college housing provided. I met Craig Willse, at Sex Panic!, in like the fall of 1997 probably, who has become my lifelong collaborator and, you know, co-conspirator, and, so—

Awad: Okay, so, you have this period of, sort of housing precarity. When—did you stay in New York during this period, did you—ultimately, what was kind of, like the break or the shift in terms of employment, or…?

Spade: So I kept all those jobs and doing all those things, and then—oh, I should say, too, the other thing that happened is during—so, at Sex Panic! there are some fun things, like, you know, part of one thing Sex Panic! was trying to do was articulate the idea of a sex panic, in saying that there's like a sex panic happening around, you know, around the narratives inside the gay neocon stuff about how people should be more domesticated and married so they won't have AIDS, I mean this kind of like, you know, anti-, this like, anti-sex and like pro-marriage and conservative framings around sexuality and family and also that, you know, the kinds of attacks on public sexual spaces, so there's like some interesting stuff happening with that, and then, you know, Sex Panic! that year, 1996, had like, a float in the pride parade where we all had like big signs that said "Come fuck with us!" It was kind of like, very simplistic but funny, like, you know, cute kind of pro-sex framing around all of it, but inside Sex Panic!, we the younger people were like, having our own differences and difficulties with the older people, in a not-surprising turn of events. So then we spun off and had our own organization called Fuck the Mayor Collective, and we produced a lot of—we made a lot of, like, stickers and wheat-pasting campaigns that were about various issues we cared about. So we had a whole campaign around—I guess under Clinton it was about—it was about the defunding of needle exchange, federally. We had a campaign around the use of closed-circuit television in, like, the parks and stuff. We had campaigns about welfare reform. I don't even know, you know, we just had very multi-issue kind of, it was an art sort of graffiti type of intervention, and that was really sweet, and then we made a zine called Swallow Your Pride, and that was a critique of like, you know, gay mainstream and also like a lot of political ed 101 about lots of things, and then we put on this event in the—in June of 1998, called Gay Shame. That was at Dumba, which was a queer, communal kind of housing space in DUMBO. That was like our alternative to gay pride, so it was like, you know, people talking about tenant organizing, and immigration, and whatever. It was like this epically long, like—you know and I just remember like, the way—we also put on an event called, that was like, it had a poster that said like, "Should dancing be illegal? Fuck no!" and it was like—we had it at Meow Mix, and amazing things happened, like Allan Bérubé, who was a gay historian and independent scholar who has passed now, but he was actually famous for doing all this historical work about like, gay life in the military, and like the ways that that developed, like gay life in places in San Francisco or like whatever, but he—and the piers and stuff—but he did this amazing, like, performance about what a sex panic was, in which people, like, played the different roles of like, kind of his theory of how you make an account of how sex panics work and what they produce in terms of regulation of people's sexual lives, and sexual spaces, whatever, and actually Justin Bond's band was playing at the end of that night, so that was like, part of the—the night was very cute. Anyway—so we put on these different events, and that was all like, coming out of this, like, kind of I think spin-off of Sex Panic! that was us kind of doing what we wanted to do. We used to meet in this café on Avenue A called Limbo all the time. Anyway, one of the people who was in that group actually is one of the people who started—oh god, what's that feminist bookstore in the Lower East Side called?

Awad: Bluestockings.

Spade: Bluestockings, yeah, Kathryn, I can't remember her last name, anyway, that may not be that person's last name anymore—anyway, interesting people. I mean there's whole sets of interesting people who were part of our world at that time who went on to do interesting things. I mean, Mattilda Sycamore is one of them, who was, like sort of peripheral to our group initially but after—Craig and I ended up leaving town and moving away, and then Mattilda actually made the next couple issues of Swallow Your Pride and continued to do Gay Shame stuff. Anyway, somewhere in here I applied to law

school. I—

Awad: Why?

Spade: Yeah, why, right? No kidding! I really liked the things I'd been learning in school from people like Ann Pellegrini. We'd read like Janet Halley's essay about the status/conduct distinction, we read Kendall Thomas's essay about like the actual context of Bowers v. Hardwick, and, so that gives you a really wrong impression about what law is about, because those are like critical thinking. That is not at all what law school's about. And I—some of my other friends who liked ideas as much as I did were gonna go to graduate school to get PhD's, and I just didn't think that a person who was poor could do that, like that just seemed like—it was, everyone always said how you couldn't get a job, and I just was like, I don't get to do that. Like that does sound fascinating, but I'm not—I also don't think I thought I was smart enough, but I also didn't think—I mean, it had been hard to go to Barnard. It had been really hard—I had not had to read in high school in order to like, get straight A's, like I'd never had to read a book, like I—you know, just, and my mom had actually told me that—she'd always told me if you listen in school, you don't need to do your homework. Because she never went through high school! You know, I mean, I appreciate her, and it was true where I was going to school, but later? Things changed, and I, so—I did find college hard, and I wasn't prepared, and I was very—it was actually, I remember, it was very amazing to make zines, and just be able to write whatever you wanted and not feel like it had to be correct, and not constantly feel like I was failing at being a good enough student or whatever. It was like, very, very amazing for me to write zines, very freeing of my writing, and I think really changed my life. But anyway, so, yeah, I thought I had to go to law school because I thought I had to go to trade school, and because I liked being persuasive and I thought this had something to do with like, you know, we had been involved in all these actions where we'd gotten arrested, you know, we'd tied ourselves to the front of the, you know, welfare authority, HRA here in New York City, in order to like, protest things that were happening with AIDS housing funding, and we, you know—I'd been doing these kinds of civil disobedience, I'd dealt with it, you know, all of our framework around what our politics was, was anti-police. It was clear that there was—you know, I had experiences where people, where we'd needed lawyers, so I just think I thought that was like a way to contribute to the struggle. I don't think I had that, like, really fully worked out, like, as most people that age don't seem to, like I didn't really understand what that role in the struggle was, or like, whatever, but I definitely needed some kind of, you know, I needed to class up somehow, or like, get out of, you know, what I was going through in terms of housing instability and whatever, and—and so yeah. So I applied to college—to law school somewhere in there, and I actually got into a lot of fancy law schools, and UCLA offered me a free ride for—like they had a new public interest law fellowship, and so even though I didn't really have any knowledge or interest in LA, I was just like, obviously I'm going to go where it's free, because I know I want to, like, get out of here and just do stuff for poor people, so I don't want to like, have all this debt. Because, pretty big cultural story about having debt and then having to go work at a farm or something, so. And so Craig and I moved to Los Angeles. And that was an abrupt, you know, abrupt change, from this very immersed activist world we'd been in. Although we did, like, I think we both lived in New York every summer after that anyway, like even—and we only lived in LA for two years. But like we came back in the summer, and I worked that first summer at Housing Works, which had been one of the, like, main orgs that had been really allied with all the work that we had been doing in our grassroots work, right, they had been like—Housing Works had been fighting Giuliani, like, unbelievably, like Giuliani had taken Housing Works as a target, you know? And they were—had a very strong reputation for doing poverty-centered, you know, very

grassroots, very aggressive, political AIDS services work, and political organizing.

Awad: Can you give me an example of like, maybe a case that either Housing Works was working on or that you worked on during your law school years?

Spade: Yeah. Well, so like that summer, I—one thing I did was I worked at their clinic in East New York, so you go to sit in a—someplace in this community, I can't remember what kind of community center or whatever it was, and you just talked to people who were like, coming with all their problems, like they've got social security issues going on, they've got, you know, there's a debt collector after them, they're having whatever, you just take in their legal issues and write them down, and see if you have any advice you can already give them, and then like, bring it back to the lawyers. So I was doing that kind of intern work, and then I also was working on a case related to—in New York City, there's rules about how people with AIDS are supposed to be put into SRO—into like, housing—individual housing instead of shelters, because they're, if they're immunocompromised, right? It's not safe to be put into like, you know, a big open room full of people, and that was like one very hard-won case in years of advocacy produced that as a different housing option for people with compromised immune systems, and then New York City was putting them in like, these incredibly dangerous SROs that had like, utterly inadequate facilities, and were, where like lots and lots of murders were happening, and where people were being abused by people who ran it, whatever. So we were doing a lot of work around that. Really, like, what I loved about—what I was excited about by Housing Works, I worked with like, incredible lawyers there, including this wonderful person, Armen Merjian, who wanted to mentor me in like a very sweet and generous way, and generally talked to me about politics very broadly, and about New York City very broadly. But what we were really, you know—what I loved about what they were doing was—you know, I had previously interned at Lambda, right, when I was an undergrad, and I'd seen how they—it felt like their offices had nothing to do with actual queer and trans poor people. It was like, a bunch of very elite lawyers from very elite schools coming up with interesting cases that they thought sounded cool and then bringing them. And Housing Works is like—the offices are full of people who are actually in the struggle, and they're getting their ideas of their big cases from what's going to actually make the biggest difference for these people, and that's why they do them, not because it'd be a cool thing to like, get a New York Times headline, you know, or like, change a law so that it says something nicer. It just felt really, really based in trying to, like, change the conditions for people on the ground. So—yeah, so the first summer I worked there—I mean I should, I guess I should say other things that were happening, that happened at UCLA. At UCLA—so, I arrived at UCLA in the fall of 1998, and Prop 209 had just passed in California, and ended affirmative action in the UC system. So UCLA had been this like, not majority white law school, in a not majority white city. It had previously had a record of graduating 25% of Latino lawyers in the nation. It had been, like, this bastion of like, people of color lawyers, law professors, critical race theory—and they had just had this huge loss, and now I was entering this school that was becoming majority white, where there was instantly, like, you know—are you okay?

Awad: Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I'm just trying to not shake the table.

Spade: Oh. —where there was like, you know, a lot of the usual things, like, of law schools—like law schools have very racially hostile environments, like super racist environments, people writing epithets on people's lockers, like really explicit stuff. And like I just—it was a total shock to me to go into the environment of law school, it's like really conservative, like other queer people there weren't out—several people were like, closeted, which was like—I was like, what? You know—not that, I mean, I'm

talking about like, white, fancy people, who were like choosing for their conservative careers to be closeted, like that level of like, kind of, it felt like it was like 1950 or something, you know what I mean? And like, just—I mean, the dynamics in the classroom, like my first year, my criminal law professor like, told us that he advocates for the Model Penal Code, which basically says that like, rape is not a crime inside marriage. I mean like, this kind of shit was like, normal, you know, like he was giving us hypothetical problems in which like, women lie about rape on the regular, in class, you know? And so... it was a total culture shock for me. All the ways of thinking I'd learned, that—from critical professors and stuff, were not okay, like you were stupid if you thought that stuff, like if you looked at the text—should I close the window?

Awad: Yeah, maybe we should do that. Hold on one second. Okay, so, you were talking a little bit about UCLA and how conservative the law school was and also how antagonistic it was in many ways, at least the pedagogy was to the kinds of theories and ideas that you were—that shaped you, right?

Spade: Yeah. I mean yeah, it was like, really antagonistic, like I—the law school newspaper, like, parodied me and called me a purist feminazi bitch, in the law school newspaper! I mean it was like, it was not subtle, I stood out like a fucking sore thumb, you know? Because I was so politicized, and believed in those ideas and thought they were like, normal to talk about, and that just wasn't a thing, you know? I had one friend—it's not like we're still close friends. I mean anyway, and one thing—one of the big kinds of political work that Craig and I ended up doing while we were there was the organizing about the post- affirmative action dynamics at UCLA. So like, we eventually organized like a, you know, to take over the records office, and get arrested, and all these things. Part of that, I think, was us bringing to the law students there who I met who were also pissed about the racism of the environment but didn't have a history of direct action work, so like we kind of brought that into the—as is typical at most law—most people got into law school don't have a history of grassroots organizing. So on the one hand, UCLA was like, a cool experience for me because there was like, Kim Crenshaw, and Cheryl Harris, and Laura Gómez, and Devon Carbado—all these amazing critical race theorists teaching there, but, so, like I actually got—I mean that's not most of what the curriculum is, right, the curriculum is just, you have to take like Contracts and Property, and from all these like, horrible people. But I did get to like, take a couple classes where I learned about critical race theory, and it completely shaped—it gave me a language for things that I could see were wrong, and it gave me, like, a framework that has obviously like, deeply, deeply influenced my thinking and my work for the rest of my life. And during—and I also, you know, was pretty eager to get out of there. So basically, I went there for two years. The summer between the first two years, I worked at Housing Works. The summer after the second year, I worked at what was called the Linda Smith Center. I was really interested in drug policy, obviously, because it was such a feeder of mass incarceration and stuff, so the Linda Smith Center, which is now called the Drug Policy Alliance, was an org doing—

Awad: This was in New York, too?

Spade: Also in New York. I mean I was always coming—I was always doing—I was like, I planned to live in New York, I didn't plan to continue living in LA, I was just going there to go to school for free. So I always came back to New York and was trying to build, like, whatever connections would help me, like, continue to work in New York. And I, at the Linda Smith—so that was the summer of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions leading to the election of George Bush, the first time? Yes. And so the Democratic National Convention was actually in LA, so I worked for the summer in San Franci—

in New York, with the Linda Smith Center. What they were—one of the things they were working on was a shadow convention with Arianna Huffington, in which—focused on three issues. Drug policy was one of them, I actually—one of them was campaign finance reform, and I can't remember what the third one was. So they were like, having a shadow convention at the Democratic National Convention. So that was really interesting because I got to be at the Democratic National Convention—not in the convention, but I got to be at like, some of the protests at the DNC in LA, because like, I flew out with them, I got to stay with them, whatever. But I never went back to LA. I—that fall I had a, like a full-time externship at the Mental Health Project of the Urban Justice Center, so, doing direct legal work for people with mental health issues, like, helping people with benefits, helping people—a lot of it was helping people apply for SSI benefits. A lot of times, like, judges deny people who have disabilities that aren't like—that you can't see, or that don't make you, like, not be able to, like, do something physical in the workplace. So, doing those cases—and I'd already done SSI work with—at Housing Works so that was, you know, I'm very interested in public benefits, always have been, and partly because of my experience as a kid being on public benefits, and seeing how brutal those systems are. So I was doing that kind of work at the Urban Justice Center, with the Mental Health Project, and—I'd also gotten, like, during the time at the Linda Smith Center I'd—the other thing I'd worked on besides the shadow conventions was working on people who go to methadone clinics in Midtown, and then all the businesses around the methadone clinics have signs in them that say like, that nobody from the methadone clinic can like, buy a sandwich there. Like there's this really blatant discrimination against people who use the methadone clinics in this one neighborhood, so we were trying to develop, like, research to see if we could do an Americans with Disabilities Act case. Because the Americans with Disabilities Act has an exemption that says that people—current drug users are not covered. It also says, like, pedophiles, transsexuals—like all these things—I think it says transsexuals—and so, it's like a moral clause that was added to the ADA in its passage to make sure that like, "bad people" who are also medicalized don't get to be people with disabilities. Anyway, it's a trip. But, so, we were trying to figure out if we could make an argument, formally or informally, to stop these businesses from excluding methadone patients from any services or retail in the area. Anyway, so then I worked at the Urban Justice Center for the fall, and I really liked it. I really liked the people I worked for, and like, I really liked learning about this kind of—the way they were practicing poverty law. I mean all these jobs, in different ways, are poverty law, except for the Linda Smith Center was more policy work, you know, it wasn't like, they don't have clients, but then I ended up doing these methadone patients, so it was more overlap with like, poverty-based organizations.

Awad: Did you ever end up doing an ADA-related case on behalf of methadone users?

Spade: I don't know if they did. I don't think they did, is my guess. I think that probably they instead were trying to use it to advocate directly rather than bringing it all the way—I mean, because like, you know, sue all these delis, it's like, I don't know. It maybe wouldn't be the best way forward, or the shortest way to get these people what they needed, or the most useful way to press that part of the law. But—and then I didn't want to go back to UCLA and I—I, I mean, we should talk—so I had chest surgery that December, which was like, December of 2000. So I was 23 or something. And I guess I should say a little about, like, what was my thinking about my own gender during this time. Basically I had a very, like—and have—like a very, you know, "gender is a social construction" sort of influence, or like—that was my framing, and my feeling about my gender for many years leading up to this, like, throughout sort of—I don't know starting when—like, you know, in college as I started to learn more about, like—

as I started to learn frameworks for understanding gender as not like this, you know, narrow binary biological thing, that was very freeing for me. And it was very freeing to find out that I was nothing and anything, instead of that I was what someone else told me I was, or that I had to have, some like, inherent belief about what I was, like that didn't ring for me. And instead that gender was like a site of like, exploration and like, complexity, like we don't know why—we don't have a full account of ourselves about even why we feel things we feel about our bodies or our genders or sexualities, whatever. But also that it wasn't because of like, a gay gene, like I very much didn't believe in like, that set of theories, which were very big then, right, the kind of like—part of the mainstreaming of gay politics was a story that we couldn't help it, and we're just like you, but different—you know, whatever. I—it was, you know, queer as in fuck you, not that. Not gay gene as in like, accept us even though we're flawed or something.

Awad: Not gay as in "I do."

Spade: Not gay as in "I do," that's good! And so that kind of—learning about that kind of deconstructive thinking about gender was really powerful for me, and like also being part of social worlds in which gender play was very much part of like our sex and flirting and fashion and—you know, just like, being and feeling simultaneously like, different versions of the word "boy" made sense for me, and more than like, the word "butch." That was like an interesting shift, because I think when I'd come out, if people had been like, "You're going to be a butch," I'd be like, "Okay," you know? Kind of like "Yeah, sure," and there'd been a lot of pleasure and joy in like, getting to take on new looks and stuff that, as I said, were freeing from like, the social norms I'd grown up with in Virginia as a girl. But it was also really freeing to—you know, starting around, in like 1997, 1998, I like, fell in love with a gay man, and we had like, a really important complex exploration of our own genders through that, because we were like, we're not supposed to like each other, because I'm supposed to be a dyke and you're supposed to be a fag, and like, this is, like, if any of our friends knew this would be so taboo, and they would think that like this was us being, like, bi or straight, but we feel like we have more of the same gender than any other two people who've ever dated, you know, each other—you know what I mean? And like, it was this—so a lot of my own gender exploration came from being in this very like, having this body and sexual relationship with this person that was like, not what either of us were supposed to be having, and that felt incredibly queer and trans to us, but that was—we kept it a secret because we were, really I don't think our social circles could handle it. Because there wasn't trans people, like, in our social circles. Hardly at all, like it wasn't a thing, you know? I mean, I knew trans women, and drag queens in my organizing and through, you know, through certainly like the anti-Giuliani stuff, but it wasn't like—we weren't immersed in a scene where like, lots of people identified as trans or that was like, part of queer life. It was very—it seemed very separate, it was very stigmatized. So—and I don't know when I started knowing this, but I was like, oh yeah, I want to have chest surgery. But I didn't know anyone who'd had it or who was talking about it, and when I would tell people, they often really freaked out. Like, close friends. Like it was—it didn't go well. That—it was definitely—most of the people I knew, I was the first person they knew who ever thought about that. So anyway, when I hadn't had chest surgery, the time I still wouldn't—hadn't decided—no, yeah, by the time I had chest surgery I think I'd—I had this happen where we'd change our email addresses, and I changed my email address to Mr. Spade, and all of my friends just started calling me Mr. Spade, because no one could know what to do with my first name. It was just like a kind of thing happening where I was like, yeah, struggling around pronouns, struggling around name. I guess I must've—I don't know when I started going by Dean, like, maybe I started going by Dean—let me think about this. Yeah, maybe I started going by Dean sometime like, around the fall of 2000 or something

like that. And I guess by "he" also. But I mean like, I lost friendships, like queer, radical queer friends I had would not call me by the right pronoun, like it was rough, it was like, really rough. And I—the only trans friends I really had were online, like people I'd met through trans listservs. There was like FTM Info and the other things I'd—and I'd met like, some other trans radicals. Because also a lot of people on those lists were like not—I couldn't relate to them at all, they were just like, "trapped in the wrong body" and "I'm really gonna be straight" and just like really narrow visions of what gender was that like, were fine but I couldn't relate to them, and so I really wanted to find friends like me. And I at one point even, probably in like the year 2000, I went to like an FTM group at the center, at the LGBT center, and there was one person in that group—my friend Ryan, who recently passed away—who was like, I could really relate to. But almost everybody else, like, sometimes they would say sexist stuff, and they were, like—they just had visions of what it was to be like, a man, that were like exactly what I was against as a feminist, and I just was like really struggling. I think—I'm sure they were all struggling, too, and just trying stuff on, and like, I don't hold any of them to it, but it was not meeting my needs socially, to feel connected to other people having my same experience, which I really needed.

Awad: So, you're in LA, for the most part, during this period—

Spade: Now we're in New York, because starting in the—like, basically, I, when I left LA in like, you know, at the end of the semester, whatever, April or something, or May, of 2000, I went back to New York and then I stayed in New York for the rest of law school.

Awad: Got it, okay. So when you're trying to access resources for surgery, can you tell me a little bit about what that was like? We're talking about 2002, now?

Spade: 2000.

Awad: 2000, sorry. The year 2000, you're in New York, you're trying to get resources to basically—to get surgery.

Spade: Yeah, so it was basically like, one is that I went to Callen-Lorde to—I wanted to get a therapist letter, and I—seeing someone as a therapist there, to get a letter for surgery, because I was gonna see Dr. Brownstein, who was like, everybody went to at the time and—for surgery. Also I got hit by a car, in—sometime in like 1999 or 2000, it was a hit and run, I was on my bike, and I like hired an attorney to like, try to get—I was really pissed that it was a hit and run, that was basically why I wanted to like, try to get something out of it, and I'd like, had medical bills, and—so I was planning to take out a loan for the surgery, and basically because, you know, of the best stroke of luck, I was like not terribly hurt by that car accident even though I did have to get some, like, I had maybe like a mild fracture in my arm or whatever. But I—the check that I got unexpectedly in the mail having no idea if I was ever going to see any money for that surgery, was the exact amount of money I had for the surgery. It was like the Goddess shined upon me. It was a really, really beautiful moment in my life. Because I would've otherwise just taken out a loan. That was what I was planning to do. But I went to Callen-Lorde to try to get this letter for this surgery, and like, it was just such a classic thing. First of all, because I was 22, under 23 or something, they put me in the teen program, which basically means, like, extra barriers, like we don't believe you are who you say you are. I don't know if this is how it is now, but this is how it was then. It just felt like—and it was like this—I felt that like, the therapist, like, wanted me to resolve all of my possible trauma issues before we would ever be allowed to talk about how I want the surgery. You

know what I mean? It was like, you—we need to deal with all of your family relationships and all of the things you've been through, and obviously I'd been through some serious shit, and I was only 22, so I hadn't worked it all out, you know? But like that is beside the point. I want this medical care, like are you—what are you going to put me through until you think I'm—

Awad: That also assumes that you can work it out.

Spade: Yeah. But it just—I mean it's so classic. Like people who're—like this kind of, long history of mental health providers who think they're doing trans people a favor by like, being completely controlling about the order of their healing and what they—you know. And it's just like, actually, like yeah, I'm on a lifelong journey to heal from my childhood trauma and also, I'm allowed—I should be allowed to like, make a decision about my body. Then I went to this other therapist who someone recommended to me who was willing to see people sliding scale, like, that also, I felt—I felt like she was—I can't remember why but I felt like she was transphobic, and she, when I—and I brought it up with her, and I just, "I'm trying to get this letter, and I feel like you're—" whatever, and she was, "I can't possibly be transphobic because I date trans people, which is like, so amazing." I mean there had also been periods even before that in LA, actually, where I'd gone to—I'd gone to some—maybe some kind of gay clinic, and I told them I wanted to get a letter for surgery, and they'd been like, you should just get a breast reduction. Like I didn't—like I didn't have large breasts, it wasn't like a—it was totally irrelevant! I mean just hitting all the walls that are very, very typical, and I was hitting them—I was still like, a white person, in law school, like, I mean, c'mon! Like it's not—I had an enormous amount of privilege in the context of medical services even though I wasn't somebody who had like a bunch of cash or—you know, I was like, relatively young, but like, it was wild, the kinds of like, enforcement. And I didn't want to take hormones at the time, but it was like—they didn't understand how you could want to like, have surgery and not have hormones, that was something nobody had ever heard of—and it was just like every mental health provider I went to, to get this letter, was just really, I felt like, giving me the story of like, gonna delay me, gonna not give it to me, gonna try to find out what else is wrong with me, or there must be some other option that's better for me that's not, basically, being trans, you know? Or like doing something that they considered "radical." Somehow eventually I got some therapist to write me a letter. It's so funny that I can't even remember now, because it was such a center of focus in my life, but I haven't thought about it in a long time. So yeah, that was happening, and I—yeah, so I paid out of pocket with this money from this car accident, which was like a fucking miracle. So I—and also, I've told UCLA, basically, I wrote them like a, you know, I'm having all these important, you know, medical things because I'm trans and so you have to let me not come back to school. Which was like, really not—you know? "I need to be around my providers." And I didn't have providers! And I did a visiting semester at CUNY Law School in the spring of 2001 which was my last semester of law school, which was awesome because I got to do—they have this really incredible welfare clinic, and so I got to like, represent CUNY undergraduates who are getting their welfare taken away from them who are trying to get an exemption so they can go to school instead of their welfare, workfare jobs so they can finish school and keep their benefits. So that was like, really amazing, really amazing teachers, everything about being in CUNY was amazing because it's like the only, like, left-ish law school in the country, so like, to actually be around, like, other students who were politicized at all, and to have teachers who were—it was really amazing. And something else that happened—we've already seen my vulnerability to making bad decisions, when I went to law school. But, you know, there was a really strong story being given to me at UCLA in terms of advice, that was like, it's really hard to get a public

industry job when you get out of law school, what you really should do if you have good grades is go get a clerkship. Yeah. So I was like, really sucked into that story, and I was like, well I guess I'll just apply for clerkships, because—like, whatever, they're telling me I should and I'll just see what happens. You know, when you apply for things it's very hard to not then do them. So I got a clerkship with the only out lesbian in the federal judiciary, Deborah Batts, in the Southern District of New York, so it was like, a clerkship, which is really hard to get, in New York, which is like, impossible, in Manhattan—like not even somewhere else in the state—and with the lesbian, the black lesbian judge. You know, this should be good, right? No, you know, of course not, it's like, federal law enforcement. So then that was my next thing, like my job started, I guess—I guess I must've—yeah, I studied for the Bar in like the summer of 2001, took the bar—

Awad: I guess I kind of wonder, you know, I know you worked for Lambda, GLAAD, and these organizations you're not—well, as an undergraduate—you're not aligned with, and then you did this clerkship which clearly you're not aligned with. Do you regret doing any of those things? Like did you feel like there was value at that time in your life, kind of doing those things, from a learning or growth perspective, or—?

Spade: I don't regret the unpaid internships when I was an undergrad. Like, they—I mean obviously, if I was talking to a student now I'd be like, spend that time instead interning with Make the Road by Walking, or with Sylvia Rivera Law Project, or with, like—every minute you can spend learning more about the battles that you—that you believe do work, but I actually needed to learn about what didn't work, because I just had no idea and there was no one there to tell me why that stuff didn't work. Now I think there's other options. But I don't regret those. Those were very short internships. And the one at NGLTF Policy Institute actually was just me working for Urvashi Vaid, and what I ended up doing was researching a report they released later about aging and LGBT people, and so I got to engage with all these women from this organization, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, who like, schooled me, on like, both ageism and like, social security policy and stuff like that, and like, helped me understand—helped me bring to NGLTF this more economic justice-centered analysis of aging, so it's just less like, "let's build a gay—"

Awad: The National Gay & Lesbian Task Force.

Spade: Yes. Anyway, so that—I don't regret that, and my relationship with Urvashi has lasted the rest of my life, and we've had a really important engagement for years. And like, her girlfriend gave me like, a used laptop when I went to law school, like really amazing, helpful, important, you know, sweet mentorship, in like, this way that's important for people who don't have parents, especially. But the clerkship I did regret, and I quit. And it's like—the dynamic—also, I should say: this is fall 2001, so like—and I'm working in lower Manhattan, so like, I get out of the subway and, like, I watch the plane fly into the World Trade Center. I like get out of the World Trade Center stop and watch the planes fly into the World Trade Center, and like—walking to work and everybody, like, passing out around me and the streets are filled with smoke. It was a wild moment in life, and my judge had a case with a defendant who was—had some kind of, like, Al-Qaeda affiliation, and she—his lawyers were trying to get a forum change, because like literally our jury room overlooked the smoldering remains of the World Trade Center, like it's not okay to have this defendant be—have to do this case in this jurisdiction, right next to this site, right? And she didn't get it. And that was really hard for me. And in general just like, there was like mandatory prayer meeting in the courthouse, just like the environment of like patriotism,

Christianity, anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, everything, in that job at that moment—I mean obviously in the country but like working for the fucking US government right next to that site—it was so opposed to everything that I believed, and thought was important, and already I was just like, what am I doing here? Like all that happens in these cases is you like, decide whether two—which of two wealthy parties gets money, or you like, help people get, like, deported, you know what I mean? I just was like, how did I end up working in law enforcement? Like, what happened? You know, because the way that the clerkships are sold in law school, and I see this in my students, they make them sound like, "you'll just learn what judges do and you'll learn how judges think." It's like, no, you are like, the next level over the cops! You're like the even worse part where they actually dispose of people! You know. So, the story is, you're never supposed to quit clerkships. You're not even supposed to—you're supposed to even say yes to the first place—you're never supposed to say no to a federal judge. I mean like, it's like this really like, old-school, you know, these lifetime appointees, like it's this old-school hierarchical system. And I was basically like, people were just like, if you quit, you'll never, like, work again, you know, kind of thing. And I had been like, having these really intense beautiful, like, email relationships with a couple of really radical trans people who I'd never met in person, and I was like, having my mind exploded about what life could be or what I could be, and like, I was reading these zines by these anarchist traveler people who like, you know, just don't even have watches and don't know where they're going the next day and don't know how they're going to eat, and have these adventures, and I was like, why am I working a job I don't believe in. Like that all—that is also an unpleasant job to do, like in this horrible building and this—so I quit, with no plan. Which is pretty intense for me, as somebody who's always kind of had to have my ducks in a row so I don't end up homeless, or—you know what I mean? Because of just not having that, like, broader support system. So I quit that job. It was very scary, I basically just told the judge, I was just like, I can't, I—this is like, my conscience can't handle this work, I don't—like I just don't believe in what's happening here, and like, I don't think—and she was actually really nice about it. She was—I just think because I made it an issue of political conscience, she like, I don't know, was okay with it. But no one had ever quit that job before, you know? It was like, really weird, like, I mean—and I went and kind of couch-surfed in the Bay Area for a while, and a lot of nice people put me up and I like, had some cater-waitering jobs, and like, whatever, random. I also got hit by a car on my bike when there, and I remember it was like—I was really scared to bike again but I had to bike because I couldn't afford to get on the bus, you know what I mean? Like it was like that, it was just a very dicey time, but while I was doing that—oh my god, we haven't talked about this. And while I still worked with the—at the—when I worked for the judge, the World Economic Forum happened in New York City, in February 2002, and I went with a bunch of my friends and argued away, you know, we had like an affinity group and we'd go to the protests and like, bring whatever our message was, and when we left we went to Grand Central Station to like, maybe get some food in the food court, and use the bathroom and stuff, and I went to the men's bathroom, and I got arrested for using the men's bathroom.

Awad: Now this was when you were at the clerkship, or after?

Spade: When I had my clerkship job. And—you know, because there was a lot of like, left independent media still happening around the World Economic Forum thing, I actually got covered, that I'd been arrested for using the bathroom. So then there was like, all these people all over the country writing about how a trans person had been arrested using the bathroom at the World Economic Forum protests, and there was a couple things that basically happened. One thing is that, like, a lot of people in New York City turned out around this. Like, there was, you know, people came to my arraignment, Susan

Tipograph, like an important left attorney, took on my case, and ultimately it got dismissed, but people started doing organizing around it. We would go to the—we would go every Wednesday night to the Boiler Room bar, and like gather, and we were like a group of people, we made like, a zine about it, and like—so there was people—a range of people reaching out to me who'd had similar experiences, like I was like, suddenly like, there was a kind of, like, flashpoint of like, people in trans experiences and gender nonconforming experiences reaching out to me and telling me about, like their—this kind of shit happening to them like with law enforcement and with all kinds of other discrimination from, you know—and welfare offices and wherever, shelters. And then also there was like, a set of trans people on the internet, like, trashing me, and like saying, like—

Awad: How come?

Spade: Because if I'd gotten arrested using the bathroom it must be because I don't pass, and I'm like, you know, I should just—I mean just like, you know, typical horizontal internalized transphobic bullshit. That was really painful. You know, really, really painful. But what came out of that was that basically I applied for money to start SRLP. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project. Because I was just inundated with information about how trans people were, like—just so many different experiences that people were sharing with me. Some of them, historical experiences, like, people being like, that's just what used to happen to us at gay bars in the 1960's in New York City, and some people being like, all these things just happened to me, or it happened to my friend, or whatever, and just realizing—I'd already, I was basically putting the pieces together about like—I'd already been doing work with poverty-based organizations, AIDS organizations, organizations that serve people who are drug users, all these poverty-based organizations where there are trans people, you know? And then just realizing, like, trans people—there was no legal services for trans people, trans people can't get services at most places—the other thing that happened was that when I—so, you know, I got arrested, and I'm in jail for like 24 hours or something, and then, you know, they bring you to a different precinct—they bring you to like, this different, like, holding room behind a courtroom—like, it's like the last place, the last kind of jail you're in before you, you know, go into the courtroom for your arraignment. And at that point they sent me into this little room to meet a lawyer who'd been court appointed. Like I didn't—Susan Tipograph wasn't involved yet, like nobody had—this had all just happened so nobody had like, found me a left lawyer or whatever. And this lawyer—

Awad: Which prison did they send you to? Or which kind of holding facility? Was it—?

Spade: I can't remember where I was—

Awad: I mean what was the gender—what did they—

Spade: They put me in the women's, yeah. And two of my friends tried to struggle with the police to release me and got arrested too—Craig and our friend Ananda—so, Ananda was also in women's jail with me and Craig was in men's jail. And so I get to this point in the process where they send me into this room to meet with this court-appointed lawyer and I was like, you know, I told him what had happened. I was like, oh yeah, I'm a law student—no, I'm a lawyer, I'm a clerk for this thing and I—you know, whatever. He obviously knew I had a lot of privilege in this situation, I'm another lawyer, basically, right, I don't—haven't passed the Bar yet, but whatever. And he wouldn't talk to me about my case until I told him what my genitals were. And it was fucking shocking. You know, I mean it's not, on the one

hand, but just like, it was so—I was like, that doesn't matter! It's not illegal for me to use the bathroom. Like, and he didn't—he just did what all, what non-trans people do, which was I get to—you're vulnerable, I get to ask you whatever I want out of my curiosity and decide whether or not you're good enough and whether or not I'm gonna actively advocate for you. And it was—you know, I hadn't slept at all, I'd been in jail overnight, I'd been arrested unexpectedly. You know, I was like, rough. Rough scene, right?. And it was infuriating, and humiliating, and that combined with, you know, all these stories people started sending into me about their humiliating and infuriating experiences, made me realize, like, what a giant gap there was around trans people's legal needs, and especially the legal needs of like, very poor trans people, because the people who have like, the most contact with the state are going to have the most gender enforcement on their bodies, whether that's because they're like, trying to go to shelters, or they're being put into jails, or whatever—all these places that are gender-segregated, and where there's so much gender-based abuse and violence. And so, this led me to develop the idea for the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, which—

Awad: Did you ever meet Sylvia Rivera?

Spade: Yeah. Yeah, she—during that same time, in like 2002 or 2001, she was advocating pretty hardcore for the New York City law to make gender identity and expression discrimination illegal. So I met her at, like, various events around that. And then she died, actually, in 2002. So we only had brief overlap, like, you know, probably only a year both doing activism where we would see each other in New York City. But yeah, so I wanted to do poverty law focused on trans and gender nonconforming people's experiences of these systems, and so one of the things I also did during that—and I was getting advice from different people about how to, like, apply to funding for a project like that, and like, how to start a project like that, and I wanted to start it inside the Urban Justice Center, because the Urban Justice Center is just like a collection of different projects, so I knew it was a place where you could like, kind of, basically like pay overhead to rent a desk, and like I would have other poverty lawyers around me who I could ask questions of, since I was like, new at so many of the things I needed to do. But I asked—

Awad: So just to clarify on the chronology, so you're working at this clerkship briefly, 9/11 happens, you have this experience getting arrested for using a men's bathroom at Grand Central, you go to the Bay, take a little break, and then come back—is that correct?

Spade: So yeah, so I—

Awad: So then, so what, when you return—what year is that, when you return?

Spade: It's 2002, still.

Awad: That's still 2002—

Spade: Yeah. So I quit my job—I think I must've quit my job in like, March or something. It's like almost—the arrest in combination with all the other things that didn't work for me about the job and all the different kinds of awakening I was having about what my role might actually be with this law degree, and like how I'd been put on this weird path to be in this clerkship—which is, you know, it's a short-term job, it's a two-year job, but I just like, why would I waste any of my fucking life doing the thing that's the opposite of what I believe in, you know? It was just all really pushing me to quit. And so—and to start

something that would be a poverty law-focused thing for trans people. I didn't—so when I quit the job I didn't know if I was ever going to get any money to start SRLP, because no one had ever started anything like that before, so why would I, you know? And—

Awad: To start a legal clinic focused on the needs of poor trans folks.

Spade: Yeah. There was like, some people doing some stuff around trans—law stuff in different places, but not in places that were poverty law. Like NCLR had Shannon Minter working there for a long time—National Center for Lesbian Rights—and he was doing important work, but that's not a poverty law organization. It's, you know, operates—it doesn't have, like, it doesn't do legal services, right? Like most of these, like ACLU, Lambda, all these places, they do—impact litigation, right, and like policy work. And so this is a very different model, to just, like—and it's not a model that funders like, funders don't care about serving poor people, right? Especially in the LGBT funding world, they've been trained to think that the only thing that matters is, like, getting these big, symbolic wins. And so it seemed like a long shot to get money to do direct poverty work, and the issues of poverty, and criminalization, and LGBT had like, been very separated by these like, years of this mainstream, rich, focused white gay movement. So there was very little trans organizations, infrastructure at all, in the country, period. I mean, there was almost nothing. And so there was like—inside NCLR, Chris Daley had gotten a fellowship the year before to start some kind of trans-focused project, so for one year he'd been doing—you know, it was very tiny stuff. And that wasn't poverty-focused at all. So I quit my job, didn't know if I was ever going to get money to do it, this was very—like, felt very scary for me. I like, went and couch-surfed in the Bay Area, and got really inspired by a lot of activism there, and like, met other people doing different forms of—a lot of art space stuff, but also just like, generally, like, doing a variety of kinds of grassroots, you know, anti-colonial, anti-racist, queer and trans, whatever, stuff. And I connected with those activists, and people who've made zines, you know, and all that range of things. And then I got the money, and I came back.

Awad: Where'd you get the money from?

Spade: I applied for a bunch of different fellowships. I got this one that OSI—I don't know if it still exists. It was—Open Site Institute had a fellowship for like, community activism in New York City. They also had one in Baltimore. And so it's like—I think I might've gotten it the same year that Bran Fenner got the same fellowship to start the Education for Liberation Project at FIERCE, like a leadership development curriculum, so—or maybe Bran got it the next year, but anyway, that's one of the ways we first met each other. But so I got that fellowship, and I also got the Berkeley Law Foundation Fellowship, which is like, for somebody coming out of law school to start a project within another organization, doing something that needs to be done. And so—looking back I'm not actually sure whether you were allowed to take two fellowships, but I did! I like, didn't know, and I'm like, maybe that's not how that works—but like, they were two very different kinds of things. Anyway, that was enough to cover the overhead at the Urban Justice Center, and to pay for me to work there. Yeah, so basically I just like started—oh, and one other thing I did that prior spring and then during the summer, I think? I'm not quite sure when I did it. Before I opened SRLP. Maybe even before I wrote the grants? I'm not sure. I did like a needs assessment, like I wrote—I kind of wrote a survey and gave it to, like, other poverty orgs, whether they were orgs that did needle exchange or they did food, or they did health services or whatever, just to ask them, like, when trans people show up here, what kind of problems do they have? What kind of legal problems do they have? Do you have anywhere to send them? Where do you send

them? And what do they say, if you know? Like what happens? Do they end up getting served? Like, and people were just like, they have all the problems, like housing, criminal, you know, benefits, like every—immigration—all the legal problems, and no, we don't have anywhere to send them. Or they have—some people said, we've had them have bad experiences trying to go to like legal aid or these various places like, their lawyer was transphobic or—you know, just all the—you know, there just was like, such a lack of capacity generally, and that was, I mean that's what we always find—have found, that just like, you know, the person's lawyer told them to find Jesus, or the person's lawyer, like, wouldn't call them back because they were trans, or wouldn't call them by their right name, or didn't advocate for them, you know what I mean, like they were supposed to, or, you know, like, I mean, some of the first clients I had at SRLP were people who had a really good case and couldn't find a lawyer for years and then they—their case ran out of the statute of limitations. Like, I had a—one of my first clients was a woman, a trans woman who'd showed up to high school wearing women's clothing with her friend, like they were gonna like, be bold, and like, come out, and come to high school wearing women's clothing. And they got kicked out of school, like they—like the school told them to leave, but not through any, like—not through any of the legal processes they're supposed to use for suspension or expulsion, and this person's family didn't speak English, and they didn't have a way of advocating for her. And so she'd like, had a perfect case for discrimination, because they—the school broke all the rules by kicking her out in this way. But she could never find a lawyer to take the case, because nobody wanted to touch it, because she was trans, you know?

Awad: Wow.

Spade: Just like, I mean, zillions of experiences—I mean I had a client who was fired from the Post Office in a similar way, I mean so many—nobody would take this stuff, you know? And these were also trans women of color, like they're probably, if they had had—if they'd been wealthy—I mean, the few cases that you, if you look historically back at like, some of the trans cases that did make it through the courts in earlier years, it was usually, like, white trans women with a lot of money. Because they had to be able to like, hire a lawyer, they had, also—usually were people who had full access to all the medical care they wanted, and so that made their cases stronger about their womanhood. I mean all this, it's just like, it's so race- and class-determined, in such deep ways, kind of who has historically gotten advocacy, in terms of trans people, who's gotten healthcare, who's gotten legal help, or like, any kind of legal status they're seeking. Anyway, so, yeah, so then I started SRLP, in the fall of 2002, at the Urban Justice Center, inside the Peter Cicchino Youth Project, which is like, their LGBT youth project, so it was like—SRLP was like—it wasn't called SRLP at the time, it was like "Gender Identity Law Project" or something like that, you know, and it was just like, my single staff position—and there was just so much need. Like, I received, constantly, so many calls from so many people in crisis, such extreme crises, I'm 24 years old, I have basically no idea what I'm doing. You know, I'm not—I've not been to housing court before, I've never—I've been to some kinds of court experiences, through these, like, internships and clinics that I've done at school, but like, very few. And like people are calling me with every problem you can imagine. You know, in every borough, every venue, people all over the country, you know, just because there's nothing that exists where you can call someone and get help, and people—social workers from inside jails are calling me about people inside the jail. You know, just like—so it was immediately very apparent—and there was like, tons of community energy for it, like people wanted to help make it happen, which is, as you know, very hard to figure out. Like how do you plug community energy into like, very specific needs? It's like an ongoing, like, question for all social movements. So, pretty soon it

became apparent that, like, me and the people who were, like, you know, gathering around to, like, figure out what we wanted out of this and how to do it, that we should make it into a collective, for a number of reasons. One was that, you know, I had a very strong analysis that I think other people around me did, too, about the ways in which existing gay nonprofits were like, deeply hierarchical, often run by lawyers, run by white people, reflected that agenda. Also, all the poverty law organizations in New York City run by like, some white man, you know, and then like, women of color working there getting paid less, the agenda being set by—you know, all of that. So just us feeling like, we do not want to reproduce, like, this structure. And so, A) like, a kind of desire to reproduce a different structure, but B) also, the desire to reproduce a structure—create a structure that could bring a lot of labor to this problem without a lot of money. Because we knew—I mean, are we ever going to get any funding again after these fellowships? Like, who fucking knows, you know? And so, but there's all these people who want to help, but we can't be through only the idea of just staff doing it, because there might not be, ever, very many staff. And I think we were all really influenced, too, by like, the critiques coming out of women of color feminist bases, particularly INCITE!—you know, eventually, in 2004, they had their big conference, The Revolution Will Not Be Funded, and they produced their book, but there was a lot of critique coming out of those communities already about the ways in which nonprofitization had damaged the anti-violence movement and produced certain kinds of leadership and certain kinds of agendas and undermined, like, you know, real political solutions to the most important political problems, and stuff like that. So in order to like, bring this community—harness this community energy, do a lot with the various community resources, not have it centered on my leadership, we produced this collective structure. We began, like—created a steering committee that had a range of different, you know, trans people on it. Some of the people who long-term involved—like, Naomi Clark, who's been involved in SRLP forever and is still part of the collective, or Daniel McGee, who was like, one of the longest-term staff members, Gabriel Arkles, one of the longest-term staff members, who's like also still very involved in the collective—various people, we created a steering committee and we researched other groups' collective models. So like, we looked at like, this Asian women's domestic violence organization in San Francisco that operates collective, and we looked at a place that was called the Time Media Jumpstart that was like—that later became May First Technology Collective, that operated as a collective in New York City and provided IT, basically, to radical and left, like, organizations. We looked at like, how do they do it, like how do you provide services, and what if you have different job roles, like some people are lawyers and some people aren't and—you know, just, what makes—how do you create a just and effective workspace for people to do this kind of work together. And we created, like, our initial model, whatever it was, and we like, had our first—I think we had our first collective retreat that summer of 2003. And we had—we wanted it to be majority people of color, we wanted it to be majority trans, you know, we created kind of different work teams, and we've just been experimenting with that model ever since, you know, adjusting and changing and trying things. And slowly—and like, I took on some interns, like Gabriel Arkles was one of my first, maybe my first intern there, Sonia Stevenson came to work there with me and started helping to try to figure out how to do fundraising to continue the project after the first, you know, year or eighteen months or whatever funding we had. And we decided to spin out of the Urban Justice Center, because we thought that we could—we thought we—we felt that we needed trans space, and there were some complications where I felt like maybe the work—this really dynamic work that was emerging in my project was really being used to fundraise generally for PCYP or UJC but not really specifically for my work, and so it was gonna, like, drain, and it was gonna prevent me from applying for certain funding because I couldn't compete with anybody in there, and it just didn't feel like it was a trans organization, you know? There was—I was the only trans person

working there, and so we wanted, like, to have an office where you walked in, and you were like—for once in your fucking life got to be immersed in a space that was like, totally supportive of trans people. And we like, you know, had battles about the bathrooms at UJC—which like, ultimately there was support around the bathrooms, but just like, we didn't want to have to constantly be—yeah, there was just a lot of desire to have trans space, you know? So we got an office in like, maybe 26th and 8th Avenue, or something, and... yeah. And then, I mean, I'm trying to remember like some people—at times we got funding through fellowships for other people to come work there. That was usually how a new lawyer would join, would be a fellowship.

Awad: Did you ever have private funding?

Spade: Yeah. We've had, just a real range of, you know, like, funding from foundations like the Open Society Institute ended up committing to fund us—I don't know if they do right now, but at various times they have funded us, or the—you know, different LGBT foundations, different, you know... One of the things that's interesting about trying to raise money for SRLP—one is that like, we've always had a huge grassroots funding approach, because like, we have a strong belief that like, raising money through people in your community who care about the work is actually the most sustainable way to do it, because like, the danger is like, you know, if you have a rich person or a foundation funding you and then they don't like what you do, and they're like, "oh." I mean like, the classic story from INCITE! was that they, you know, got this huge amount of funding to do this set of conferences they wanted to do, and then somebody at the Ford Foundation saw their statement in solidarity with Palestinian people on their website and like, pulled their funding. And so then you become vulnerable to like, the political whims of the elite, which is like, not going to—you know? You're not going to end capitalism if rich people are running your shit. So obviously I have a deep belief in grassroots fundraising. So we've always used that. But one of the things that's interesting in my experience over time fundraising for SRLP was that like, every group we applied to for funding didn't have—hadn't thought about trans people before, for the most part, or, because gay politics—mainstream gay politics had been so focused on like marriage, military, and like anti-discrimination, and so focused on the sort of profile of a rich, white gay couple for so long, like when you apply to criminal justice-focused organizations, or foundations, or foundations that focus on economic justice, they aren't used to seeing LGBT-related applications, and they're like, "Well how many of these people can there really be?" There's a sense that, especially trans—there's like a story that there must be only like three trans people out there, you know what I mean? Like a kind of—deeply, my narrative, there was this story. And, you know, no data about trans people existed at the time, that you could say—I mean like, the—there was like this one survey somebody had done that showed that like, black trans women had incredibly high rates of HIV in LA. Like, very few tiny studies that showed extreme conditions, but no general stories about how many trans people there are, or like, how many of them are in prison. So for a lot of these criminal justice-focused, for example, foundations, for them—even for them it's still often like, radical to fund something for women in prison, you know? To say—like to take—they're just like, they couldn't wrap their heads around it. So—and this was true for women's foundations, this was true for LGBT foundations that were like, "Why would we fund poverty stuff? Why would we fund direct services? That's not effective. You need to just bring one big case." I mean I can't tell you how many times I sat in meetings with big funders who fund LGBT stuff and they were like, "You guys should stop doing the direct services part, and just do impact litigation. Like that's what would be—that's what we would fund." And we're like, that's so incredibly fucked up. You know? So we—I mean, the amount of work you do when you're trying to create that, where you

have to apply, like, a zillion times to get them to even start to conceptual—and meet with them, and—so they can even conceptualize your problem, and then you get the funding years later, maybe. Like, the amount of work we had to do to squeeze out the tiniest amount of funding, I mean, and it still remains, you know, really—SRLP's obviously deeply underfunded for the intense, intense, intense need that we're trying to meet and the huge waitlist that always exists for our services and just the like—you know, it's just the nature of doing left political work in a principled way, you know?

Awad: So, SRLP, then, has been around for fifteen years? I wonder—so, have there been other organizations that—throughout the US, who have, you know, reproduced SRLP's, like, model, or does SRLP remain the only legal services organization focused on the needs of trans folks?

Spade: A lot of different stuff has emerged since then. I'm not—and I'm not going to give it a full account right now without like, giving, being, you know—because I'm going to forget something and feel terrible about that, but basically like… So, in the period when SRLP emerges, a lot of things start changing in trans politics. One thing that's interesting to me is, I think the existence of SRLP really pushed some of the mainstream gay orgs to even hire a trans person. Like, I think we were actually—you know what I mean? We pushed, and we were threatening, and we—just the fact that we existed in our, like, trans things are needed. And like, the Transgender Law Center emerges, the National Center for Transgender Equality emerges. Those groups don't do direct services to poor people, and at times have had different, you know, politics and analysis on key issues of racial economic justice than us. And that obviously changes all the time with changing leadership and stuff. But like, you see, after SRLP starts existing, like, you know, a little while after that Lambda adds trans people to their mission statement, and then they hire one trans lawyer, Cole Thaler, who's an amazing person who later goes on to work at Legal Aid in Georgia, but, and they've continued to have one trans lawyer since then. And so you see this kind of—you know, and we were having pretty significant, like, you know, we—there's this thing called the LGBT Litigators' Roundtable, and it happens maybe even more than once a year, and it had happened for years, and it was brought together every year by Lambda, GLAD with one A (which is not the same GLAAD that I worked at—I worked at the new organization when I was an undergrad), but, GLAD the legal organization, the ACLU's LGBT project, and NCLR, the National Center for Lesbian Rights. And it's like, these four organizations, and they bring together this round table, and they talk about, like, the kind of litigation agenda of the LGBT movement, and SRLP, as soon as we started getting invited—which we were not always invited, it'd be uneven. Like some years we'd be invited, some years we wouldn't. And then eventually SRLP lawyers wrote an article that included a critique of the roundtable, and then I think we stopped getting invited forever. But we would—I could be wrong about that, but anyway—we would be there and be the only ones being like—always like, bringing shit up about racism and sexism, and like, the problems, with, you know, and economic justice, and the problems with these agendas that were emerging, and then other people who worked in those orgs would come behind us and be like, "Thanks for saying that. I can't say that because my boss is here." You know, like, the level at which—to any—to some degree, some people who were people of color, who cared about racial and economic justice, were in those rooms, they were all like, on lockdown because their orgs—you know, they were working for these very traditional legal organizations that're hierarchical, that tell them what the agenda's gonna be. And the SRLP was like this rogue part of that, you know, and often some of the only people of color lawyers, the only trans lawyers in the room, you know? So not—you know, or one of very few. So, it's, you know, there's been a kind of complex relationship to those orgs. So, that being said, those orgs started to do some more trans work, and I think even to do—to be pushed to do,

sometimes, issues that were a little, touched prison a little bit or something. But often it'd be just because that individual, like, trans attorney—like, Cole Thaler's somebody who, like—people in the, like, in SRLP, and our allies, we were really like, "Cole! This is why you need to be a prison abolitionist," and he like, totally got into it, and like, understood it, and then he became this advocate. But like, you know, we would have—we would try to make these people our plants in these organizations that really were hostile to our agendas. Or who, like, were never going to touch trans people and prison issues, or something like that. Anyway, so that—so TLC and TTE emerged as like, more like, kind of national level, like, you know, kind of—very different than SRLP, but taking on trans stuff specifically. And then, you know, like, different projects have emerged at different times where we've done a lot of support for people around the model, SRLP model. So for example for a while there was like a trans poverty legal services thing emerging out of LA called—oh my god, it was inside a, like an arts kind of space called Imprenta, and so like, I did a lot of work with those people to try to have that emerge, and there was like an organization in LA called Gender Justice LA that was also, at the same time, trying to like, become more racial justice-oriented. There's been a lot of—we've done a lot of work like that with people. Like, not exactly replicating SRLP, nobody's done that, but building on either pieces around the collective leadership, or pieces around serving certain communities, or pieces around just having a gender justice analysis—a racial justice analysis or a poverty justice analysis inside orgs, trans orgs that kind of started and became instantly very like, white, or you know—like that's just a tension everywhere. The thing is that there's a lot of—SRLP's main allies are orgs that aren't necessarily trans orgs, or aren't necessarily legal orgs. Like, SRLP's main allies in New York City historically were like, FIERCE, Audre Lorde Project, and Queers for Economic Justice, which we eventually all moved into a building together. And those—none of those orgs do legal services. So in an ideal world, part of our model is that SRLP tends—people come to SRLP because they need something, and then SRLP both serves their needs and connects them with political organizing, including with other political—other orgs that might have different campaigns than SRLP, right? So like, services are a vital—fundamental part of organizing because it's the way people come in, is like, usually through like, something they originally need, and then also they're pissed, you know? But it's like the way you get people through the door. So that was sort of part of the model, but there's tons of orgs all over the United States that are mostly, like, unstaffed or hardly have any staff, racial and economic justice orgs of various kinds, or migrant justice orgs, that have a lot of queer people working at them, and may or may not have a queer and trans mission statement, but are SRLP—you know, we have a lot of overlap or we do a lot of collaborating, or share models or ideas, or LGBT—but most of them don't do legal services. Like, SRLP's politics don't really belong in a legal services world or in the impact litigation world, cause it's neither, like, legal aid, which is like, you know, usually very depoliticized work that's just legal work and is like, different laws make it—prohibit them from doing certain kinds of organizing, or it's like, you know, the gay legal world, which is all like, impact litigation by elite organizations where all the staff went to like, Harvard and Yale, and then they all—you know, and tons of straight people work at those orgs—you know, and just like a totally different model of social change. So I think SRLP is strange in that way, violates a lot of the rules of the profession that it's—professions that it's part of.

Awad: Can I ask you—I know you're, you have to go soon, and if we, you know, run out of time maybe we can continue it later. But I'm wondering, what was your vision for SRLP's work at that time, and, you know, has it changed, and if so, in what ways?

Spade: Well, I mean, one major thing is that like, SRLP's work came out of so many people's vision and

analysis, so like, I walked into that situation with a certain framework. Like I'd been working in these legal—different kinds of legal orgs, I had ideas about kinds of things that happened to poor trans people in some of these contexts of shelters, or buffer offices or whatever, but I didn't really, like—one of the first people who worked at SRLP who really transformed my thinking was Rickke Manazala, and he came to the work as an organizer, and he put racial justice in the center of it in a way that was different than I would've known to do. I was like, still using poverty law frameworks, which obviously are primarily about people of color, like that's, you know, like, the most concentration of poverty is in communities of color, especially in urban areas like New York City and so that's who's coming for poverty law services. But I, like, as a white person and a lawyer, like, even though I'd studied critical race theory and had been doing work—anti-racist work of different kinds for many years, there was a whole another level of like, thinking about racial justice that Rickke brought—Rickke and Sonia Stevenson brought to that organization, and shifted, like, SRLP's whole mission statement away from being—just talking about economic justice and poverty, to talking about racial and economic justice and understanding why that changes how you do the work. You know what I mean? Like, and then we went through this whole racial justice organizational development process with this group, Dismantling Racism Works, that Rickke and Sonia led this process and brought those people in, and like, brought us all to a deeper level of shared skills around what dismantling racism looks like, including inside nonprofits, so we can look at like, how are we in danger of replicating this—even just the things like how we budget. So like, I mean there's so many people who made the vision of SRLP and have continued to make it, and Rickke really influenced a frame of how we understand the relationship between SRLP's direct services and what community organizing looks like, and the relationship between services and organizing. Like I had some ideas about that, but like Rickke was such—so much more deeply involved in community organizing. He'd been working at the Prison Moratorium Project, and then with FIERCE, and so there was like a ton of—and he was very influenced by the movement in the Phillipines, and whatever, he's just like had a level of study around social change, around organizing models that like really transformed how SRLP understood what its services were, what its relationship was to organizing, relationship to policy work. And that's obviously, ongoing, we're always trying to figure that out. Something that's changed, I think it's interesting, about 15 years out, is that like, now we have trans mainstreaming, there's a lot more people doing legal and policy work related to trans stuff than there were at the time, there was like nobody. So like, at that time, I was like, one of a few people in the country thinking at all about like, all the fucked up weird rules about where you can change your birth certificate, where you can change your driver's license gender, like all those things, I created this whole, like, curriculum to try to have people do local organizing in their own state to try to figure out who to target to change those rules, because there was like, not gonna be any funded anybody anywhere, so I was like, going around to different states meeting with, like, local organizers to be like, "Okay, look, there's like these, you know, seven kinds of policies. This stuff in Medicaid, this stuff in your DMV, this stuff in your Department of Vital Statistics, this stuff in your homeless shelters in different cities, whatever, this stuff in the jails and prisons, like, let's do a strategy center to figure out, like—are any of these possible targets in your state, or in your city, and which one are you going to organize around, and like, how about, you know?" I was doing that kind of stuff, and now there's like—now the like, LGBT nonprofit-industrial complex has taken on some of those policy issues, like I don't—like SRLP doesn't need to, like, do—that stuff is actually now more mainstreamed, and so SRLP can be like, at the edge of the harder shit that nobody cares about, which is like people who are in psychiatric hospitals, people in deportation proceedings, like, you know? Like, right? Like the stuff that you still can't get funding for, you know what I mean? Whereas like, now there's like an understanding of those things as policy issues that at the time nobody gave a fuck about. So

there's ways in which, because SRLP's always going to move to the most vulnerable, and move towards like, undocumented people, people of color, you know, people with disabilities, our workload, or the area of work has gotten to lose some things that are—that can be lifted off by groups that still don't really care about poor people, you know what I mean? Or like, care about people of color, but like, can see a policy issue. And especially after same-sex marriage battles ended, now like a lot of LGBT orgs are like, scrambling to have a reason to exist, and so they have picked up trans stuff as like, something that like, can give them a reason to exist, so they're gonna pick up, of course statewide policy issues that are not—that don't look like they involve hated communities. So if it's something you could put like, a trans corporate worker in need of, then they'll like it. I'm so cynical, I'm sorry!

Awad: That's okay.

Spade: But, you know how I feel. So anyway, so some of those things, wonderfully, are being done by other people, so that's cool, you know, but the problem is that the conditions have continued to worsen for immigrants, poor people, criminalized people in the United States, with every passing year that SRLP has existed, those conditions have worsened, right? Like, the wealth gap has widened, the economic crash of 2008, the rising cost of rent in cities, like, you know, the emboldenment of police and ICE, like, so—the people in crisis for SRLP, the mainstreaming of trans politics has not reduced the crisis for SRLP's constituencies, and the need for SRLP's work is more severe than ever. But also there's this weird thing where like, all these more resourced groups with much bigger communications staffs and stuff are like, saying they've got trans taken care of, but like, they just have, like, this particular form of trans advocacy that will never reach the people who are in the most need. So I mean, that's—there's nothing surprising about that, that's the way, like, social movements in the United States are, but interesting to watch that in my lifetime. I didn't know trans mainstreaming was going to happen, like I'm actually very surprised that it happened.

Awad: How come?

Spade: It just felt like the depth at which trans people were simultaneously like, hated and reviled, and nobody gave a fuck, you know what I mean? And how hard it has been to have people to get funders, or to get—to get anybody to care that trans people exist or admit trans people exist, like the fact that prison administrators will just be like, "We don't have any trans people here," and I'm like, "I know twenty in your prison," you know what I mean? Like that just—yeah, just the particular story around transness was both hypervisibility, you know, Law & Order episode, whatever, you know, like, this person is—you know, this reviled public figure, but simultaneously a story about how there's almost none of these people, or this isn't a part of any important population that matters. And so I'm just really surprised to now have like trans people on every single episode of every single TV show, or like, in Pepsi commercials or whatever the fuck, you know? Like that is—it doesn't—sadly, people think that changes the conditions people live under and it doesn't, but I don't—I didn't think that was going to—it seems kind of random, actually, like, you know what I mean? Just seemed like it was a weird, politically convenient moment. Like I wish—I don't think anyone can really make an account of why those things happen when they happen, but there probably are like a few things that made that happen, I don't know what they are.

Awad: Can we just check our time real quick? I don't wanna make you late for—

Spade: It's 1:16.

Awad: Oh, shoot, it's one—

Spade: I probably—

Awad: —have to go? May I ask you one last question? What do you consider, like, your biggest accomplishment? In, you know, in your life as an activist, as an attorney, as a concerned citizen? What do you think is your biggest accomplishment, or something that you're just proud of?

Spade: I think that the work that like, all of us in SRLP have done—and in other formations I was part of, like another formation that like, we created with—out of SRLP but also with people from Black & Pink, and, you know, TGI Justice Project and stuff like—another thing we created was this thing called Transforming Justice, in 2007, 10 years ago, that was like—that existed for five years, and brought together trans people who'd previously been in prison, and whatever. Like this work we did was a part of growing and building this racial and economic justice-centered queer & trans analysis that has been—you know, that has existed all along, beside the growing mainstreaming of gay politics, you know, since way before—you know, since before I was born, this threat has always been there but we've been one part of like, developing and holding and keeping that going, alongside so many other groups, like, you know. But—and making the emergent trans politics have somebody like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock at the lead—like, and having people who have politics about prisons, having black trans women, having economic justice, like having those talking points even be in that mix at all, because there could be a trans politics that was all Caitlyn Jenner, you know what I mean? Or that was all, like—like I think it's still, like, the mainstreaming is pretty bleak, but like the fact that we have been part of this tradition of keeping alive this, like, racial and economic justice-based work, and like, SRLP is still a place where like, any given day there's like a bunch of people who show up there who're like, in the worst fucking conditions and situations, and they get some kind of support, you know? And there's like so—SRLP is like, a huge portion of our clients are like, people who are currently in prisons and jails, who get something, even if it's just a letter. You know? Like, I feel like that—all the pressures in queer and trans politics are so against that happening, and the fact that we've managed to like, eke that out and keep that happening in various ways, both influencing like, what the knowledges that—about trans people that're produced are, whether it's like in the mainstream or in the activist community, or in literatures or whatever, and having that, like, mean that people who would just be utterly abandoned by, like, what gay politics mostly is, that at least some people have gotten something out of that, like that's—that's the point of it, you know? I mean, obviously there's like a million things I would—wish could be more, you know? But I do think that we're just, like, sticking around, and that's like, hard enough. That's like, you know, that's something. Just trying to keep—and trying to keep having—producing that model, and like, producing that kind of thinking, and having, like, new leadership come out of that, and like different people become, like, politicized, and like, share their insight and their life experiences because they got, like, support through those existing frames and things like that, yeah.

Awad: Thank you, Dean.

Awad: Okay, it is July 18, 2017. I am doing Part 2 of my oral history with Dean Spade. We're doing the conversation remotely over the phone, and I just wanted to follow up because Dean has been active in various movements in the past few decades and has a lot of insight into the history and direction of

trans politics, to just get some of those insights added to this oral history. So, Dean, can you tell me, what is, I think, the toughest—or you think, the toughest thing for activists to learn when they become a part of a movement? What is something that you think is challenging to learn, I guess?

Spade: That's a good question. What's challenging to learn when you become part of a movement? I think—I mean I think this really depends on people and where they're coming from, you know, in their life experience, right? So for some people when they enter a movement, like, one of the hardest things is like, rigor, like being in groups for long meetings and having to make decisions together or having to follow up from the tasks they've been assigned, or, you know, do—like, be where they said they were going to be, or be on time for others, or, like, do a task that's like, kind of boring, like driving someone around, or, you know, helping people fill out forms, or, you know what I mean? That's like—I think for some people, the kind of like, work-iness of movement is more challenging and they're in it more for like, the thrills of the, like, amazing march, or like the protest, or the disruption, you know? So I think for some people that's challenging. Whereas for others I think people, like, struggle—I've seen people who struggle with like, publicly taking a stand, like having to be the person who, like, is part of yelling at the mayor while they're on stage and disrupting the event, and feeling like, "Oh my god, that's so scary," and like the kind of risk-taking of taking a strong position and being out on a limb publicly like, is really hard for some people, depending often on like, you know, how they adapted to their lives growing up, and like, what kinds of pressures were on them. I think, like, for some of us, like, entering movements—a lot of times I think people enter movements because they're pissed about oppression they've experienced, and so they come in from that perspective and it can be complicated to come into a really mixed space lots of different times. People don't realize that they also have privilege. So like, I'm not only the oppressed in this situation, I'm also somebody who needs to like, step back and let others participate, or who needs to like, focus on fostering other people's leadership, or like, get more skills that're about like, also being critical of how I'm like, participating here from this perspective that I have privilege. I think that can be—if people are entering because they're pissed about what happened to them, that part can be, like, newer, or harder, or like, an expectation they weren't—didn't have skills yet, or wanted to, but didn't—couldn't be like, kind of like a period of trying to figure out, like, what does that feel like and how would that play out? I think also like, for a lot of people in movement like, just trusting of other people is really hard. Like if you've kind of been going it alone, and like, being in a lot of hostile environments where there wasn't a lot of other people like you. And I see this a lot in trans movements, like a lot—especially when I first started doing a lot of trans stuff and the early 2000s. Like, so many places I would go and talk to trans people, or even different trans people in New York, if they'd been just like roughing it out by themself and doing a ton of like, work by themself. Like they'd had to train the place that they worked, or they'd been keep—keeping being asked to train a place where they're the only trans person in the room, or they're the only trans client of this service agency and they're having to do all the advocacy. So they'd get kind of like, really used to doing it alone, and it can actually be hard to then start doing it collaboratively or to like, make decisions in a group, because they've had both like, the unfortunate aspects of doing it alone but also like, they get to control the narrative, or they get to like, get all the attention or—you know, depending on their personality that may be like, a difficult transition. I've seen it a lot because of the ways that trans people are put into—have often been isolated like that. Isolation can make the transition to working with others difficult and for some people, I think, as that movement has grown, depending on like, where they were living or what part of—what sector they were working in or whatever, that transition may have occurred during their, you know, activist lifetime, and it could've felt like, really competitive with other people who came

into the scene, or just struggled to have a good collaborative relationship. I mean I think people really vary. I mean—you know, another thing that comes up that can be really hard is, like, overwork, like taking on too much, wanting to please everybody, wanting—feeling everything is urgent and indispensable and just becoming totally overcommitted. You know, not being able to follow through, or having, like, a health crisis. That's a really common pattern people because there's so much urgency and so much need, and so much needs to be done, and like, we don't necessarily have skills for knowing like, how to measure what's a realistic amount to take on, or maybe we're motivated to take things on because we want to feel indispensable or want to feel—want people to like us, so then there's like, having like this outrageous workload. I mean I think there's this—so much of what happens to people in movements relates to like, our broader existing emotional patterns, and like, what kinds of ways we come in resourced, and what kinds of ways we come in having been unsupported in our lives in different ways and like, missing certain skills, whether it's the skill to see our own privilege or whether it's like, the skill to collaborate with others, or whether, like, we weren't in spaces where we could trust people so it's hard to trust people now. So I think a lot of times in movements you see a lot of conflict because people are having to—you know, everyone's showing up with their own histories and difficulties and wounds, and sore spots, and they're rubbing each other the wrong way, and you also see, I think sometimes a lot of people getting to become more full people through those relationships and like, through the feedback we get, and like, that's definitely my experience. Like, I got to learn a lot about myself by making mistakes in movement organizations and by getting feedback from other people in movement organizations about things I was doing that weren't working or things that I was doing that were a good contribution. So like, I feel like in the same way, other important relationships can help us kind of—grow us up, or help us become more whole, or like, fill out parts of ourselves that were underdeveloped by the conditions we were in or that we were afraid to develop. I think participating in movements can have that effect with people, at its best.

Awad: Thanks, that's a—that was a very thorough answer. I wanted to circle back a little bit when you brought up this issue of urgency. We're living right now under the Trump administration, and after Trump was endowed the presidency—I still don't want to say "elected" —there was sort of a split among progressives on what that meant—or people who consider themselves to be "progressive." And some people said, "This is unprecedented. This is extraordinary. This represents an aberration in our—in the country's history. Et cetera, et cetera." And then there were others that said, "No. What he represents has been going on for, you know, decades," and this sort of thing. And for people who have been doing work for so many years on so many different issues and have such sharp critiques, what do you—what is your take on the time what we're in? And how do you respond to those sorts of perceptions? How do they differ from your own perception of the time that we're in now, living under this administration?

Spade: Yeah. I also saw those reactions, and I think that it's an interesting dialogue that says a lot about, you know, different kinds of access to analysis and information that different populations have. So I feel like it makes a lot of sense that a lot of people would be kind of like, newly shocked and offended to have like, you know, a president who's a rapist, and a climate change denier, and openly racist, and all of those things. You know, that should be alarming, but I really get—and I see how that could bring some people to a new feeling of urgency that they hadn't had before. And then for those of us who were already part of social movements that felt that things were urgent and desperate, it makes sense that we would have, also, a critique of like... Yeah, like this is of a piece. This presidency has a lot to do with all the prior presidencies and, like, with the things that this country's institutions were like, founded to

do around. You know, racism, slavery, settler colonialism, you know, immigration enforcement, et cetera. I think for me what it really feels like is, the Trump presidency is all the other recent presidencies but like with the—with a lot of aspects of the mask pulled off, or something. So like, the mask of multiculturalism has been a strategy especially of the Democratic Party but also to some degree the Republican Party for—in recent decades. So like, pretending to like, have some talking points about racism. Meanwhile, maintaining like, extremely deadly actual policies and practices toward people of color. And like, the Trump administration doesn't really bother with the mask of multiculturalism or the mask of, like, kind of neoliberal faux-feminism, or like, other kind of what I would call, like "fake progressive" masks. You know, so that's interesting, in terms of like the level of the symbolic and representative. And then I think, in terms of policy, is like an intensification of the existing. So it's like Obama, like, built up this outrageously massive immigration enforcement regime, and that—and he, you know—many, many, many, many people and movements tried to get him to not build it up, and to, like, reduce it and dismantle parts of it before Trump came into office, and he didn't choose to do that. And so then Trump gets to use that. So like that's not—it would be a mistake to be—to pretend that Trump invented that, or that that wasn't a collaboration between all the prior regimes that has made that, you know, this size. On the other hand, the level of the symbolic matters, because I think like, even before Trump has a chance to like, change laws, his—the election, or you know, the presidency, or like an openly white supremacist, openly anti-immigrant, you know, person has really emboldened the police, and ICE and other immigration enforcement agencies. There's a sense in which, even before he changes the law, people are already saying, like, immigration judges are doing different things, like there's a sense of emboldenment in the tactics of all of those agents of the state who have so much discretion to do their jobs in ways that are way, even more brutal, punishing, and murderous. So it matters a lot that we have this administration in place and it can do a lot of extreme harm, and the mistake would be to like, think that we'd be better—we were better off—like we'd be better off, you know, things would be great if we had a Democrat, right? Like that's the mistake and that actually allows the Democratic Party to keep moving to the right further, when we kind of let them be the alternative in our minds, or when we think—so I think that one of the ways that, like, right-wing regimes keep moving things to the right for everybody, not just for them but also for like, the supposed left, and just like, the whole picture moves right, which it's been doing, you know, solidly in the United States for, you know, many many presidencies... The way it keeps moving right is that, like, it represents the new, like, low bar, and then anybody who's like slightly above that bar gets credited as being progressive even though they're actually really far to the right. So that's what I think—that's what I'm like, worried about as well, like, whether or not we have another Trump administration after this, or another horrible Republican administration that's similar. I feel like we'll still have a Democratic administration if we have one that's like, to the right, even, of Obama. Because that's—like it's like, the whole negotiation keeps inching in that direction and since all those parties are for the benefit of white rich settlers, like, that's in their best interest to go that way, and the politics of the symbolic is moving in that direction and the bar is very low for them to look progressive because they just have to be like, "Yes, climate change exists," or "Yes, Paris Accords," or, you know, "Yes, rape is wrong," and then like, they suddenly look progressive, you know? Whether or not any of their politics actually supports like, the wellness of people or our planet. So, I think it's a complicated thing. And that moment—I think I've also felt like—things feel very end-timesy, you know? And I know that everybody says that. Every—people always feel that they're at the end of times, but for something that happens like, total clown, like this person who's like—I literally keep going like, "I'm inside a parody," you know? Especially when his tweets are read out loud on TV, or, you know, on Democracy Now headlines that I listen to. I'm just like, "Did that really

happen?" There's a—like, the parody aspect of it feels like this last gasping of like, US empire that's just so like, absurd and like, openly, like, destructive and murderous, but I also remember that during the George W. Bush presidency, like, his stupidity was really celebrated. And I think actually it was to the benefit of his administration to pretend that he was stupid so that the like, incredible amount of traction they gained for really horrible nightmarish things to happen, and the amazing like, amount of change they actually made to the US government and military in their short, you know, time, like, was kind of under the mask of how—of this like, story about how stupid he is. So I think that's like, one of the things I worry about now is like, the danger of the focus on Donald Trump as a person, because it just, like, that's the whole thing, right? He's a brand, he's a celebrity. Like, he doesn't really matter. What matters is like, the institution of the presidency and the administration and like, all the broader law enforcement agencies, and the broader conditions, and I think he's sort of a distraction in that way. At times, because we can just kind of talk about him and his hijinks rather than having people have a deeper analysis of the conditions they live under that would—that they would be living under even if they had, you know, Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama as president. So yeah, I mean, it's a wild time that feels really, really scary, and I think that that debate about whether things are so much worse or not is a debate that really just tells us more about the—what people in the US do and don't know about the country they live in and the conditions they live under and like, what constitutes enough to seem scary or problematic, and what constitutes enough amelioration of that to go back to sleep or not be active. And then the other question is like, a lot of people got pissed and motivated by this election, but what'd they do? Like were they just encouraged to like, give to Planned Parenthood online, or to the ACLU? Like did they do anything else in their communities that like, let them become political participants, or expanded their political viewpoints, or built new relationships, or actually like, support people who are in the worst conditions, like—or were there kind of containment strategies that made their action like, kind of minimal or symbolic? And like, kind of, what's really happening with what we—what people with political imaginations are about how they can participate at this point? Like that's a big question for me, and like, also the role of like, social media, in like, helping people feel like they've done something when they've just like, said something to a limited set of viewers on social media. And so like, how are some of the—what're some of the—I'm very curious, what're some of the current containment strategies that make you feel like you've done something when you have not actually gotten any of the benefits of political participation that can come, like more relationships, new analysis, you know, like, increased safety and preparedness for the next disaster because you know more people in your neighborhood, or anything like that. So I think that's like another kind of dilemma that we're seeing at this point.

Awad: Now, you just discussed how the right has pushed Americans, I guess as a whole, and—but also politicians, further and further to the right so the—our understanding of what's a progressive or even, when people use the word "leftist," is radically different from, you know, what those terms might signify in other contexts or countries. And I'm wondering, how has this push to the—what you perceive as being a push to the right—affected politics shaping and impacting the lives of trans and gender nonconforming people?

Spade: Yeah. I mean, I think there's a few ways. So like, one thing is that the entire story of what we would now maybe—commonly gets called like, the LGBT movement, is one of these stories, of like, the shift from like, what we could under—what I would understand as more left politics that was in the mix in the 1960's and 70's, when there was like, you know, international anti-colonial movements happening, there was like, kind of an internationalist framework in the United States of a fight against white

supremacy and colonialism, and there was a feminist and queer politics that was like, very much a part of that, intermixed with that, and lots of different overlapping movements, and that politics was pretty explicitly like, anti-war, anti-police. And then, you know, as the crackdown came against that politics and what we'd call "neoliberalism" emerges, we see the rise of—we see this in lots of social movements—we see like, the rise of a different strain of that movement—and this happened not only in the LGBT movement but elsewhere—where there's a rise of a strain that divorces itself from the left content of the politics and instead proposes an inclusion politics that just is really about, like, "Include lesbian and gay people in the military. Include lesbian and gay people in marriage. Include lesbian and gay people in the police forces." Like a kind of—a new framework that abandoned and kind of—that basically proposed what I would consider like, a conservative gay inclusion politics, which then had, often, a, you know, complex battle about whether or not trans people should be included in that, because that politics was pretty assimilationist, and wanted to make gay people look like the kinds of good citizens who deserved to be included, and so trans people, like—and also lots of other people—made that look bad. And so then there was kind of this battle to like, have a trans politics like that. So there's been this like—that's been going on. Meanwhile, of course, there's also been the whole time, like an ongoing, very left queer and trans feminist politics that has been doing work against policing, and doing work against war, and has like, continuously articulated a critique of the rise of that very visible, you know, kind of pro-existing systems, inclusion-focused politics. So that, like, sort of divide, and the, like, ongoing mainstreaming of trans politics that we see now, where we're increasingly seeing, like.... You know, mainstream culture has just like, discovered trans advocacy, and trans people, and there's trans people on every TV show, and what that new discovery is, you know, is like, the emergence of that more narrow, assimilationist, inclusion-focused framework for trans people. Like, that. And so now the LGBT organizations, like, are doing that for trans people. Like, there's a kind of like, a—there's now like a legitimate way to be trans—which of course always implies that there's also an illegitimate way—so there's basically the rise of like an image of, like, professional, usually white, you know, upper class, you know, presumed not-disabled, set of trans people who are deserving citizens and who should be able to, you know, be in the military and should be able to be police and should be able to be corporate leaders and politicians and lawyers and whatever. That whole story is like, this moment of mainstreaming, which brings, like, trans people's humanness into like, public debate in some new way, but only in the—under these conditions in which humanness is still tied to like, whiteness, able-bodiedness, you know, not being a person with a conviction, not being a person with—who's undocumented, et cetera. So we still have—you know, now this divide between—and it's more complicated than the account I'm giving because there's so much complexity about, you know, in every part of this, about the way different issues cut, and the way different moments of advocacy and these things are debated, but ultimately what's happening is kind of like, the rise of an acceptable trans figure and advocacy around that, that is similar to the advocacy that happened for lesbian and gay people, as that sort of movement had—grew a neoliberal or conservative wing. And that advocacy affirms existing conditions and institutions through the story of accepting, like, a hated population into it. And one part of the way we talk about that is through the term "pinkwashing." So the idea that, like—and this, I think this is actually really important right now—like, one way that institutions and systems that are being targeted as racist and harmful and colonial can like, try to like, do PR for themselves right now, is to say that they are pro-gay or trans. Like it's a way to appear progressive and detract attention from like, what it is they're actually doing that they're under critique for. So like that term—as you know—was popularized and is most commonly used when talking about the explicit strategies of the state of Israel to do a PR campaign to make itself look modern and innovative and diverse and all of these things in

the face of, you know, global opposition to its apartheid regime, and colonization of Palestine and genocide of the Palestinian people. So Israel has, like, this really good marketing campaign about how gay-friendly it is, and how gay people can serve in the military and all of this stuff, and that—but that is not done alone by Israel. That strategy was used by the Obama campaign, in the second term, to sort of make Obama the quote-unquote "gay president" and like, distract from his, like, extreme, you know, politics of deportation, and war on whistleblowers, and all of the million things, by making him seem progressive because he's like, attached to this like, you know, front lines issues of, you know, gay marriage and then eventually even some stuff around trans things and… Corporations use it and lots and lots of, you know, local politicians use it, like we see it all the time, you know, locally here in Seattle, where our local politicians, you know, they want to distance themselves from the reality that they, you know, that the Seattle Police Department kills black people. And they want to distance themselves from, you know, the new jail project they're building, so then they, like, have a press conference about how they're declaring Washington a "hate-free state." You know? They use the idea that they're progressive because they like gay and lesbian people—or LGBT people—as a way to really make themselves look different than what their politics are, including the actual politics of what—the things that affect queer and trans people. I mean, that's what's so wild about a lot of it, is like, queer and trans people don't really benefit when institutions or politicians or states declare themselves LGBT-friendly, because they're still doing all this stuff that hurts queer and trans people, even if that stuff is not in the name of queer and trans people. Maybe it's just that they're deporting people, but there's lots of reasons queer and trans people are more likely to be deported, or maybe they're just putting people in prison, but there's lots of reasons why those people are more likely to be imprisoned. And so there's a—this whole dynamic is very, I think, very complex, and it's extremely alive right now, like it's really the—one of the favorite strategies of institutions and politicians to make themselves look progressive and hide what they're actually doing. And so that's really complicated, I think, for trans people right now, because like, supposedly we're having our—finally we're having our moment in the sun, but the actual conditions that make that possible, and any actual—like, that will result in good things for us, are pretty troubling.

Awad: Now, you received the Kessler Award in 2016 and you gave a speech in which you said that—it was about two months, I think, after Trump entered office, and you said, "This is a time for nobodies." And what you just said in that answer made me think a little bit about that. Could you talk a little bit about what you meant and maybe your thinking around what, you know, "this is a time for nobodies" means, has evolved? But if you could just speak to that a little bit and what you see as being effective, and, I guess, community- and life-affirming political practice in this moment?

Spade: Yeah, so I was quoting Reina Gossett, who gave a talk the year before—a graduation speech at Hampshire College—where she talked about the idea of nobodies and I thought it was so helpful. I mean, one part of it is the way in which our hierarchies—the hierarchies occur in our society. The way they work is they want us all to like, desire to be somebody, and be willing to ignore anybody who we've been told is a nobody. You know, like the fact that some people are disposable is essential to like, capitalism and white supremacy, to having a prison state, to having a police state, to having, you know, border enforcement. Like we have to believe that these people don't matter, that some people are not important, they're not worthy, they're not really human, and we have to all be striving to not be nobody but to be somebody. And this also is really important inside our movements because one of the ways that our movements get so co-opted by, you know, major institutions and governments is by, you know, buying us, like having us sell out, like to use a kind of old-fashioned term, right? To have it be like, "Wow,

I could get a job at this place if I go and kind of like, represent LGBT for them, or tell them that what they're doing is okay, or help them sell a really watered-down version of our politics. Or make their TV show seem really hip by having some, like, problematic trans content, or whatever. Like there's a way in which we're all asked to participate in making our movements, like, watered down or ineffective by, like—we're being bought. Or by selling out other people in our movements. Like by accepting political compromises where we're like, "Well, this'll help white rich trans people who have citizenship, and it'll actually hurt trans people who're not that, but let's go for that," you know? Kind of like, that kind of selling out as well, all those political compromises that're like, typical of inclusion movements that kind of, you know, affirm institutions like the police, or the military, or the system of capitalist employment or whatever, in the name of getting a few people included, whereas the most vulnerable people don't get shit. So, that's like part of why I thought that was important. So another piece of this is like, the thing I felt really strongly when the election happened and so many new people were mobilized and pissed and scared, which is a really reasonable and appropriate reaction to the election—I felt really disturbed, as I mentioned before, that most people don't have meaningful ways to plug into political action, and I felt like a lot of organizations and institutions were doing irresponsible things by misleading people into thinking they'd take action for the small things. So an example of this was that the ACLU created a pledge you can do online that said that you pledged to protect the constitution, and like, you go onto their website, and you click, and pledge to protect the constitution, and probably they solicit you for a donation or whatever. And I just was like, "What the fuck?" Like, that does absolutely nothing, like absolutely nothing. Also, like, the—even the marketing that the ACLU was going to, like, sue Trump and that was going to save us all, like, you know, is so irresponsible. It's not true. You cannot—like, most of what's going on in the United States that's harming people already isn't something you can win a lawsuit about. Like, the border isn't illegal. Having the largest prison system in the world isn't illegal. Like all the—we can't sue our way out of this, you know? Like there are—yes, occasionally you can win a lawsuit about something, and sometimes you can get some relief but often it's just symbolic. So the idea, like—people's anger and fear would be channeled into like, this useless clicking something online like, really worried me, and also like, it worried me because, I mean obviously the ACLU should do whatever it wants, but part of the reason that feels so irresponsible or scary is because most people have been deprived of real, meaningful information about what—how social movements work, how to get involved in them, what the histories of social change are, like how change really happens. Most people have been raised, in the United States, on like really simplistic, untrue stories about how like, one lawsuit—like, Brown v. Board of Education—like, you know, ended racism, or like, if you care about something, all you can do, basically, is vote, or like, click on things online, or like, give somebody money. There's like, very little access to information, or like frameworks around like, how to do meaningful social change work in your own community. And also social change has been framed as like, a career, so like, unless it's your job, there's nothing you can do about it, kind of thing. So that really worried me, so what I was focusing on in that speech, and what I've been focusing a lot on since then, is trying to help people spread ideas about mutual aid projects. So, mutual aid is like, one term for it, but some people use the term "self-help" —there's a lot of different terms for it. Basically when people get together to do work in their community to provide each other things that they vitally need, but the framework isn't like a charity framework, which is like, you know, generally charity frameworks are whatever, like, you know, it's like rich people give, like, crumbs to poor people, based on the idea that they, like, to get into heaven or to get a tax break, often, for the rich people, and always there's like, judgment included. Like, "Oh, you can have money—you can have food, but you can't have money because we're worried you'll spend it on drugs, and we don't think you could manage it, and you're not

housing-ready because you're not sober, because you don't take your meds..." Like, all that stuff's kind of like, framing that makes it seem like people are poor because there's something wrong with them, or people are homeless because there's something wrong with them. Mutual aid is the opposite of that. It's like, there's something wrong with the society and with the structures and that's why people don't have the things they need, so let's give each other things that we need in a politicized context, and let's do it as part of our broader work to like, transform and dismantle the current system and build a world in which everybody has everything they need. So people do all kinds of mutual aid projects all the time. Most of them are unpaid, like, nonprofessional projects people just commit to doing together. Like, you know, examples are like, if we were to create a carpool so people can visit people—can visit their families in prisons, in prisons kind of far away in our state. Or we're going to do a food program where we're going to hand out free food at the park on Fridays. Or we're going to do a childcare collective so that we will make childcare available for people so they can go to political meetings, or go to their doctor's appointments, or whatever, and not like, you know, not have a way to take care of their kids and either face getting busted by CPS for leaving their kids alone or, you know, not being able to go to a thing they need to go to. Or—I mean, mutual aid programs can be anything. It can—here in Seattle we've had a long-term project that when, like, an employer doesn't pay somebody, or a landlord doesn't give back money they owe a tenant, these people go and they do protests at the lawyer—at the landlord's house, or at the boss's house, and like, force them to give the money back by like, making a public spectacle, and they've gotten tons of money for people back from these—you know, that the court system would never have been able to get back for these tenants and employees. Or, you know, mutual aid projects can be a zillion things. It can be like, disaster relief, like Occupy Sandy. It's a zillion things, but basically, to me, mutual aid is like what's really—one of the things that's really missing in the political imagination right now. Like people have a hard time thinking about quote-unquote "nobodies," right? People have a hard time thinking about who is actually not getting what they need right now. People love to think about the big symbolic issues in our kind of media field and like, we're a lot about like, what's represented, we're not a lot about like, kind of the daily mundane realities of how many people in our country are like, broke, criminalized, like, deportable, you know, single parents, like, inadequately housed, all of those things. And so like, what would it take to have a lot of people who're really pissed right now, instead of only being funneled into like, symbolic acts, or like, you know, raging on Facebook, actually like, be part of like, a committed project in their community to like, meet someone in need. And like, by doing that, you have to meet a lot of other people, and you often learn a lot about, like, social structures that you weren't aware of, and you—maybe you go in pissed about a particular thing but then you end up learning about like, other aspects of it or other differences inside that community, or other vulnerabilities, or how that system really works, and like, it's very politically meaningful and you form relationships with people that—where you all have to like, build trust and help each other out and like, do boring or weird or complicated things together, and that can be really, like, you know, incredible. And those people are the people who are going to like, help you out when you're sick later, like, when you need child care. So it's like—I think it just like, builds a depth of both political structure for our movements and analysis for us as people and relationships that can really help us with like, the current incoming crises. So I really believe in like, mutual aid as this alternative—or as a long-standing, existing thing, but as an alternative framework to the one that I think we're mostly sold about what we should do right now, which is mostly like, giving money to a few large organizations, or social media, or maybe like, get a career in social justice, which is like a totally different thing that like, only a few people can get paid to do these kinds of jobs, in the big picture, right? Whereas the stuff—the amount of stuff that needs to happen is huge. So after that Kessler Lecture one of the things I was working on for a long time

was a website that is called bigdoorbrigade.com that like, has a mutual aid toolkit that's about like, what is mutual aid, and then has like, a lot of projec—mutual aid projects—

Awad: Dig door?

Spade: Big door, yeah.

Awad: Okay.

Spade: —listed with like, you know, details about how they do it, just to like—stuff to inspire people, and also, like, some tools that you could replicate to create these projects in your own community. Just because I think a lot of this stuff, like, can be, you know, somewhat hard to find, depending on, like, how much of a beginner a person is at, like, thinking about this stuff. And I'm working now on a video with a filmmaker who makes kind of like, interesting animated films, to try to like, popularize the idea of mutual aid a little bit more and share some of the stuff I just said to you. But yeah I mean it's just—I think part of it is like, I really care about poor people and I think poverty is like, not hip, like it's not interesting—like the politics people are getting riled up about, often like kind of leave out the piece around poverty, like—and the day-to-day conditions that affect so many people, so it's like people—you know, even people who are willing to go to a march about the police killed somebody, which is so important, then like, in between aren't doing anything of the things in their own communities that could help make the next person a little bit less vulnerable to policing. Because a lot of things that make people vulnerable to policing relate to being poor, like having, you know, mental health crises but not knowing people to call besides the cops, or not having like, support in your community, or like not being adequately housed, or all of these things. And so I guess I'm—part of it for me is like—yeah, like, wanting us to move also from like, this moment we're at now where a lot of people want to get famous on Twitter or like—including people with politics—there's still a desire to be somebody, and a desire to ignore nobodies, that's I think throughout our—the ways that we internalize capitalism and white supremacy and then practice our politics, even our radical politics. And that makes a lot of sense and we should have compassion for ourselves that we have those kinds of thoughts and like, buy into that stuff, but I was kind of hoping to like, share some stuff that would help people think some of that through and like... Reina's idea about "nobodies" I think is a really succinct way of asking ourselves, "Are there people I think are nobody?" and, "Am I trying to be somebody?" and how does that play out, and, "What would I do differently in my day-to-day political work if I didn't think anybody should be nobody," you know?

Awad: I remember earlier this year, I stumbled across an article about a woman whose name escapes me who was an activist and headed the first union of welfare recipients—

Spade: Hmmm.

Awad: —and I had no idea there was once a union for welfare recipients, where they would push back against the way the government treated welfare recipients, the amount of money the provisos that they would put in place to require, you know, welfare recipients to hold down certain kinds of jobs, or not, you know, drink alcohol, and how the collapse of that union and her life's work led to what we saw in the 90's, under Clinton, where, you know, you had welfare being tied to reproductive injustice sort of policies, which didn't begin with Clinton but were exacerbated a lot by his welfare bill, and I thought that was interesting. I have to look up her name again, but... I mean, the other—I guess my one pushback

against what you're saying is that we're also living in a context where people don't have to sell out per se in the way that, in our generation, we think of "selling out." Like, you know, I'm going to—I've been part of these movements, or I cared about such-and-such issue, but I'm going to work for this evil corporation. Like the idea of the "evil corporation" sort of died with social media, and people give so much of their labor, their creativity, their time to social media, and I think receive a kind of psychological wage from that. And definitely people who are digital natives, I think it can be more intense, because you didn't live in a time where there was no internet, you know? And so there's like this surveillance piece, there's this piece about psychological dues, and there isn't really the same analysis of power regarding corporate entities, military entities, et cetera that I feel was more available and more accessible to our generation. I don't know if you agree with that, but I feel like that's a huge elephant in the room when I think about trying to do anything that helps people that have fewer resources and trying to galvanize people to do things about it. Because right now, we have GoFundMe, we have Kickstarter, we have these sorts of platforms which have sort of become this tiny Band-Aid on this, like, ocean of need that has been created by the decline of different kinds of services, entitlements, benefits, access to care, et cetera, and…. I don't know. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to that, or maybe you have thoughts about that, or not, I don't know.

Spade: Yeah, I mean, I really agree with what you're saying. I think like—I mean I think it's hard to even have a full account of the impact of all the things that—the internet and social media, and all the changes they are making for us politically, because we're so in the midst of it in many ways. Like, kind of at the beginning of it still, where it's still a transition between those of us who grew up without it and then a very new, smaller set of people that's growing, but like, it's still, like, just the beginning of anybody being a digital native, you know? And so it's interesting to think about this. I mean—and I wonder—I am sure that my perspective on this is skewed. I, you know, I just assume I'm missing a lot of things, and I really struggle to not be too anti-technology, because of the ways in which I feel really astounded by some of the changes. Like, one of the things I am really worried about is the ways in which people are turned towards primarily maintaining a personal brand. And I think that social affirmation is a very deep human need, and so finding a way to kind of commodify that on—in like, likes and views, online, and make every single person believe they can kind of, like, feel fame, I think that has like a very addictive nature for people. Like, it's—so many people tell me that like, when they post something online they like, check constantly to see whether or not it's been seen or liked, and that it can become a very compulsive relationship, to feel seen enough and liked enough, and yet, from what I understand, the research shows people have less in-person relationships than ever before, and more people live alone than ever before, and more and more people spend more and more of their time engaging only through screens and not with other live humans. And so, even though I think there's also creative, and interesting, and wonderful, and connective things that happen, and of course, we see this in, you know, highly marginalized communities, like trans communities and disability communities, where people get to connect—have gotten to connect and build community online, often who are very isolated from others like them. I think there's a lot of wonderful things in that. I think—I just am also very concerned about like, kind of what it means to have a compulsive relationship to being seen in this way, and some of the things I see in social movements are stuff like, people…. I see people have really destructive relationships to social movement organizations, because I think when I was coming up, becoming part of an org that was—that was radical, and had people like you in it, and represented your politics, was like a really big deal, and you really wanted to like, be a part of that and contribute and be seen as part of that, but now I think it's really rewarding to go into an org like that, and tear it down and show how

much more radical you are than that on the internet. And that gets really rewarded, and you could like, get a speaking tour out of that, or like, be—feel kind of like, gay famous, like, elsewhere, and more broadly internationally. And all that's happened is enough people have liked. Like it doesn't—like, what's happening from what you did isn't causing the work the org used to do to get done now everywhere. It's just making a lot of people feel radical, and definitely, I'm sure, a good analysis was created, but the dilemma is like, the kind of tear-down culture, where we tear down other activists, and tear down orgs so that we can promote ourselves as the most radical on social media, and appear the most right, you know? Just really is like, not likely to build relationships, which is like, the basis of social movement transformation. Like it's not likely to cause, like, people to try hard things together, and then like, get feedback, and grow, and change, and like, stay in it, and keep working in a particular, you know, region, or local community, or population. Like, it's—it often undermines that kind of commitment. And there's kind of a lack of humility. It's like, everyone's trying to be gay famous about it, and really, the work of social movements includes, like, tons of like, mundane support for one another and like—you know, somebody's gotta sweep, and somebody's gotta give a ride to people who can't drive, and somebody's gotta like, make sure that like, we sent all the letters to people in prison so that they can give feedback on what we're thinking about doing before we develop the idea the next way. You know, it's just like—it's a lot of like, human care and connection, and that's not—I think that stuff is not—like the attention span for that is weakening, and the, like, attraction of being glamorous online with your radical politics is pretty compelling. Which, you know—and I say all of that while also being somebody who fully believes that we should critique, you know—critique each other and have feedback in our movements and our organizations. It's not about like, falling into line or shutting up. But I think for me, historically, there's been a difference between having maybe a public critique of like, major institutions that are like, you know, promoting evil ideas, but then having a really principled, sincere engagement with other people trying to do, like, really radical and transformative, like, anti-racist, feminist queer work, by not like, putting it—not trying to expose them when I have a disagreement, but first like, checking in and seeing whether we can like, influence each other, and like, have a dialogue, and like, see who's at the table, and like, really try to figure out if we can go a different direction if I'm really concerned. Or often just like, assuming they've already thought through it and maybe I don't know the most, you know what I mean? That's also okay. But I feel like there's kind of a different incentive now, which is to like, be the person who tears down the most radical thing first and most thoroughly, because that will make you look—that will give you the most, like, credit or something. And that is just really problematic and harmful because I don't think that our social movement organizations, that are so embattled and often tiny, and overworked, and dealing with all the crisis that comes from these systems—like they usually just don't have the resources to handle it. Like, it can really cause a lot of harm because they're just very vulnerable, they don't have good communication strategies—yeah, so like, people are really overworked and tired, and have—a lot of people have identities where they've been under attack their whole lives, so it's like, really hurtful and painful, and so it's like... I think the destruction from that is like, a concern, and more broadly I'm concerned about just like, the level of isolation people are experiencing. Like, when I think about like, you know, Hurricane Katrina, which like, was such an instructive, intense experience for so many communities in the United States to see, you know, that level of government abandonment, and that level of environmental destruction, and the loss that—you know, that New Orleans has in no way recovered from. One of the lessons people who were there talked a lot about is that what, if anything, saved people, was other people knowing where they were, or knowing each other, having networks in place, like having connections. And I also heard this about Hurricane Sandy. Like, it was organizations like CAAAV, that like, knew that there were like, elders living in Chinatown at the

tops of buildings that didn't—where they like, wouldn't be able to get down the stairs, and they wouldn't have water up there. Like, it's those relationships that actually relate to people's lives being sustainable or not, in the face of all the crises in the coming months, or the ones that we're already in, and so more and more people not having trusting, or even any kind of like, live relationships with people in their immediate region, or in their town or neighborhood, I think is actually just really dangerous for us. And then also, getting our sense of the world through these corporations, like you're describing, through Facebook, through Twitter, through Tumblr. Like, having those corporations mediate our sense of like, connectedness, relationship, our—the knowledge we're allowed to access, like, that's just some scary shit. And I agree with you that I think there just like—there's very little critique or concern about that. Like, those things sell themselves as liberating us and connecting us, and people act like that's what they're mainly there to do, but that's never what, you know, capitalism is there to do. So, that feels really scary.

Awad: Is there anything you would like to add to this, or any—I know we have to wrap up in a few minutes, but—any additional comment or thought you want to add?

Spade: I don't think so.

Awad: Okay. Well, I think that was a good sort of overview of like, the moment we're living in, and so I think maybe let's end it there and …. Yeah, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to talk with you again, and… Yeah, thank you. I'm excited that we have your story as a contribution to the Trans Oral History archive. Alright.

Spade: Thank you so much for including me, and for taking the time to do this work! I mean, I really appreciate it.

Awad: Aw, thanks, Dean. Okay.