

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**KYLE KATZ**

**Interviewer:** Lenni

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**Transcribed by** Colette Arrand

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Lenni: Hello, my name is Lenni, and I will be having a conversation with Kyle Katz for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is May 4, 2017, and this is being recorded at Sage Midtown in the Library. Okay. Thank you so much for um, interviewing with me, Kyle.

Kyle Katz: Thanks for asking me.

Lenni: Yeah. Um, so can you tell me your full name and your age, as you like to be called?

Katz: My name is Kyle Ezra Katz, and I'm 51 years old.

Lenni: What, um, are your gender pronouns, and how would you describe your gender, Kyle?

Katz: My pronouns are they, them, their, and I describe my gender, oh my god, that's—I can't even do that easily. Um, well, I'm trans masculine, but I don't identify as a man. So that's a long story that we're going to get into more questions where that will explain more clearly over time. Actually, I'm going to leave it at that for now.

Lenni: Where and when were you born?

Katz: I'm from Boston. Born in the Boston [inaudible] where half everybody from Boston was born at that time, in 1965.

Lenni: How long have you lived in New York City?

Katz: I have only lived in New York since last August. It's all new. I'm like, that's like eight months or something.

Lenni: Do you have a nickname? And how did you get it?

Katz: Oh my god, I have so many nicknames. [Laughter]. Well, my birthname is something that I share with the former Presidential candidate, uh, and as a result of that, people started calling me Hickory and Hicky, and Hick. So when I was a kid people called me Hicky or Hick most of the time. And in high school people called me Smash. And when I came out as a lesbian, I started saying Smash Patriarchy, and when I wanted to write graffiti tags, I did Smash with my address number of my building, 149, and for reasons too obscure to explain, I became Swamp Rat for awhile. And uh, since I changed my last name to Katz, I am called Katzy and also Kittens now.

Lenni: What kind of things interested you when you were a child? What did you get excited about?

Katz: Well, I think one thing that strikes me is, funny gender thing is you know how they say like straight girls like horses, and I liked dinosaurs. I was big into the idea that I wanted to be a

paleontologist and dig up dinosaur bones when I was a kid. And the funny thing is, since that time the dinosaurs have changed. Like, they've discovered more about dinosaurs and they've changed the names, and like, I had a big book of dinosaurs and I was really attached to knowing all the dinosaurs names and they changed some of them. Some of them they decided were actually one and they just collapsed them, some of them disappeared. It's like when you lose Pluto as a planet, or you lose St. Christopher, you know, I feel like my dinosaur is missing because they cancelled him, so that's kind of sad. But um, I was into train sets, um, and I was into boy things and I like, you know—I had a doll, it was a baby doll. I left it on a parked car and the car drove away with it, and I just didn't care at all. I was like, I don't even know why I had it outside. I hated it. It was naked, you know, it had like plastic limbs on a cloth body, and I chopped off all of its hair in a funny way, and it just was so ugly, and like the car drove away with it and I was like okay, good, there goes the stupid doll, because I hated doll.

Lenni: What were your parents and family's reactions to your interests and who you were? Then and now maybe.

Katz: Um, my mother was pretty cool with the idea of like, a tomboy kind of phase. I mean, I was you know I was up every tree, and since I lived in the city where there weren't very many trees I was also up fire escapes and the sides of buildings and everything. And uh my mother was okay with that. My father left when I was four and so he just didn't really have much to say about it. He wasn't around. Um, my maternal grandmother sort of stood in for my father and she was very unhappy with it, and always giving me all the pressure to be more ladylike, buying me dresses, you know, just giving me a hard time about that. so that was the most—that was the hardest part. My mother only gave me pressure about it in relation to my grandmother. She'd be like, no, it's like Easter, you have to put on the pretty dress and go out to the fancy place with your grandmother and me, and other than that you know if it was just a regular day she'd just let me wear my shorts or whatever. So it was okay.

Lenni: And what's your relationship with your family like today?

Katz: Um, unfortunately they passed away. Um, my father is still alive but I've been pretty much estranged from him since I was 18 and my mother and my grandmother died a long, long time ago. My mother died 19 years ago now, so um I've been on my own for awhile.

Lenni: That's a great segue to thinking about community. Um, can you tell me about your relationship to like trans and gender non-conforming community? And yeah, tell me about your relationship to trans and gender non-conforming community.

Katz: Um, when I was mmm, probably yeah when I was 18, I started going to Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth. And we didn't talk too much about transgender then. This was about 1985. And uh there were some trans people there. We didn't call it trans though. It was like, they were mostly called drag queens and very occasionally transsexuals. Um, and it was kind of hush-hush. Like, we were sort of accepting, like we were—some people were probably very accepting, but I was a little freaked out. I was like it's all cool that we're here together being whatever crazy

thing we are, but I don't really know what that is, you know? I don't think I—like I thought I was being tolerant at the time but I did not, I don't think I felt really comfortable about that. And uh, it was a cool space, but you know, in terms of trans people for years I didn't see anybody who I got to know well. It was trans women that I did see were, you know, like, I associated mostly with drag queens, you know, and there's some crossover there, but I didn't understand what the nuances were. So I don't think I discovered trans community—in the 90s sometime, Allison Bechdel, it was Dykes to Watch Out For started covering trans people. And that was my sort of introduction to it. It was like oh, this is happening now, trans people are here. And very gradually I heard about more and more trans people and they crept into the corners of my life, and I saw, you know, and I didn't know anybody personally really well. But like, the transmasculine characters in that, I think that sort of started me Googling and like, you know, basically getting to know some people online and friending all the—we used to have this term, “birls.”

Lenni: [Laughter].

Katz: The birls!

Lenni: Tell me about birls.

Katz: The birls was like, the birls and the bois, the b-o-i bois and the b-i-r-l-s. I never really figured out what the difference was, but it was people who were being just slightly more transmasculine than butch lesbians. Because I was—oh, so I have to go back. So I became a lesbian when I was 18, and I was very butch, you know? I mean, not hard butch, [Laughter], not like hard, but like, I didn't wear a bra, I was always in a t-shirt, and my bazungas, which were kind of huge, were just in everybody's face.

Lenni: [Laughter].

Katz: So, and I had very short hair. So everybody knew I was a lesbian. I was wearing buttons and rainbows or whatever or I was wearing like, you know, I was very into lesbian culture. I was wearing Michigan Women's Music Festival t-shirts, you know? Like everybody who saw me in a t-shirt always knew I was a dyke. Sometimes if I was wearing a coat or something, people would think I was a guy, but most of the time I was out everywhere and everybody [inaudible]. So I was being a butch lesbian and what gradually happened was the birls and the bois were sort of transmasculine-er, like people were not using butch anymore, and butch was losing popularity really fast, and nobody was saying dyke anymore, and I was transitioning into people transitioning. And uh I read an article in 2007, probably 2008 um in Sun Magazine, which somebody handed me this, like I don't know we never read that magazine, I don't know anything about it. It was like, the only one I've ever read. And there was this article about how the lesbians in San Francisco were pissed that all their butches were transitioning and there were no more butches. And I thought, when I saw that article topic, I was like oh yeah, that sounds really sucky, you know? Like, I don't want there to not be anymore butches, I've been a butch for 20 years now, you know? And um so I start reading the article thinking that I'm going to agree with the angle of the author, and I read it and I'm like oh shit, I actually want to transition. I'm like, why

wouldn't I? Like, what early reason would there be for me not to? Like, I've never wanted my boobs, I used to play games with my boobs, like they were just such weird appendages that seemed so awkward and bizarre. I mean, sometimes I used them like, you know, girls liked them, and I was like, happy to be sexy or whatever, but mostly I was just like, I grabbed them in both hands and I make them talk like aliens and shit, you know? Like I just play fucking—they had names. Mimi and Edna and shit. Mimi and Edna would like do goofy things for people. It totally, you know what, they looked like they were eyes, and like, if you like, sort of reposition your body it's really funny. So I used to just goof off with them because they were so like, you know, because I was like these things, I have these weird appendages here so I'm going to be a goofball with them. And so I was just like, okay, obviously I don't want those. I mean, they've been ruining the fucking line of my shirts and my ties for like all these years, you know? And um, and so I knew that so viscerally after I read this article, and I was married. I was a married lesbian in Massachusetts. We got married as soon, like we went to, the night it became legal in Massachusetts we went and got our marriage license. We'd already been together five years and we got married, and uh and I went to my partner and I said, you know, I think I really am trans, you know? I think I want to transition. And it was a big shock to her. And uh, I mean, she adjusted. Oh my God she adjusted great. We broke up now, we broke up last year, but it was not because I'm trans, [Laughter]. But um and it was a big adjustment for me. And I was very depressed at the time. I had left my job of 20 years because I was depressed, and so I thought oh well, obviously I want to transition, so that's part of why I was depressed, but probably not the whole thing. I mean, now I've been transitioned for nine years, I'm still depressed. But uh, but I'm a lot better. So I just went through the whole thing of like, I was so psyched about just top surgery. I got top surgery in eight months. Like eight months from that, like I was like that, I know I want. Hormones, I went on hormones as well. Um, I was excited about some of the changes that it would make. Um. I was excited, but my voice was already deep. I mean, people said to me that I had the deepest voice of any woman that they knew already, and I was perfectly stoked for my voice to get deeper, and I was stoked to grow facial hair, which never worked out. And uh, um, you know, and for what it would do to my genitals. I thought that was interesting and exciting and fun to play with. So um, so I took hormones, but I'm bad at—as a result of my depression, I'm bad at showing up for appointments. I mean, I skip—I used to skip like 50% of all appointments that I had. I'd just stay in bed. And I am also—I mean, I did give the shot to myself a number of times. Have you seen the fucking needle?

Lenni: Mmhmm.

Katz: It's like a big fucking needle, and I gave it to myself at least 10 times. But not in a timely way. Like I would have to work up to it. So I did not keep my testosterone levels up to where they should be. So I took, every so often, testosterone for like five years. I never took it—I'm a non-compliant patient. I'm a very bad patient. So I never took it regularly, and I couldn't get my beard to grow, you know, like I've got the—you guys can't see my funny facial hair, but—

Lenni: [Laughter].

Katz: But I love it. I keep it on all the time, even though it's like, paltry and sparse or whatever. But—

Lenni: What do you love about it?

Katz: You know what? Without it I don't necessarily pass. I mean, I pretty much pass all the time now. Hardly anybody thinks I'm a woman. When they do they think I'm a big dyke, but without it I will get misgendered a little more as a female, and um, and I'm on the fence about that because I don't identify as male. So it's just, I guess I identify more as male than as female—you know, I've been fighting from being a girl for so long that I really hate being called "she." And it used to be kind of exciting to be called "he" because at least they were knowing, noticing that I wasn't really a she. And now it's just uncomfortable to be called either, because either is not seeing all of who I am, so there's that. I don't know if I answered the question because I don't remember what the question was.

Lenni: What is your relationship to trans community today? How do you feel about it, and how do you practically participate in trans community or not participate? Um, and how would you like to in the future?

Katz: The participating that I've been doing has been, uh, lobbying. In Massachusetts I went to the state house. It's funny because I used to go for gay marriage, which I feel totally ambivalent about, you know, like, I get married because I want the rights that it's going to give me, but I don't think rewarding coupledness is the right way to go exactly, so I'm just like whatever, but I'm just going to do that because we're here now and this is the time we live in, and this is what there is until we can change it. But anyway—so I was lobbying for gay marriage, and then I moved on to lobbying for trans rights, because we had a trans rights bill that went in sort of year after year and it didn't pass a couple years, and then it passed without public accommodations stuff. No bathrooms, no hotels, restaurants kind of protections, so we had to keep going in like the next couple of years to get the bathroom part on. Got the whole thing now, so it's great. But it only happened like two years ago or something. So I used to lobby my state reps and my senator, but—and I'd see everybody, you know? Like you'd get to the state house, you'd see the whole gang of people who are in the habit of doing that stuff. But I didn't really have like much trans community besides that, you know? Like, I Facebook friended the people that I met there and yeah. And I Facebook friended a ton of trans people I didn't know. So it's like my community was mostly online except for oh, like Pride march. We have a group in Massachusetts called Mass Trans Political Caucus. So I'd march with them at Pride. So Pride march I'd see them lobbying, I'd see them, most of the rest of the time, queer community, it wasn't necessary anymore. When I was young and I was a lesbian, it was all about queer community but that was because we weren't accepted, and we were fighting for our rights and you really, really needed queer community. In Massachusetts, queer is so accepted that I actually hang out with mostly straight people, [Laughter], you know? Like I don't need to seek out those queer community that much. I see it in the queer health center where I go, and I see it just in little niches here and there. If I go to an event or something—I'm not a bar person anymore, and there's no lesbian bars in Boston anymore, and not very many gay bars, you know? So.

Lenni: And what about now in New York? Since you moved here?

Katz: Now I'm in New York.

Lenni: And what made you move here?

Katz: Um, well after I broke up with my ex, I met my current fiancé, and she had always had a dream of moving here when she was just, when I met her she was like, I'm going to move to New York, and I said I've always wanted to live in New York, I love New York, it's incredible, and when I say that I mean almost from the literature, because I seriously have hardly ever been here before—I've been here like five times in my life, and almost never stayed overnight even, and when I was here I was very busy doing something specific. It wasn't like I got to know it. But I read about it all the time. And like, my favorite thing is to read fiction about it. Oh, and—Jewish, okay? Look, Jewish culture is like a huge thing to me, most of—very few of my relatives are Jewish, I'm hardly Jewish at all. I'm a quarter Jewish on the wrong side, right? But I identify as Jewish because those were the relatives who were most important in my life. And uh—

Lenni: Do you feel that your Jewishness and your transness intersect at all? Like in what ways they like connect? Or Jewishness and gender?

Katz: I think that Jewishness often to me implies a level of questioning god and questioning authority that allows you to say, um, no, like, the culture brings resistance along with it. Like, it allows us to say, you know, no to things that seem like they're rules. It allows you to question the rules. You know? I feel like you say Rabbi, the rule is like such and such, do I really have to do that? and the Rabbi says no, well what do you feel like you should do, you know? And—

Lenni: That's a good Rabbi voice, [Laughter]. No, no, no! What should you do?

Katz: You know, because I'm—it's a reform Jew is what I'm saying, you know? You know, reform Jews, they're like no, you can be who you want to be and look, the Rabbi is a female anyway and the cantors are female, too.

Lenni: They're all trans, yeah.

Katz: Yeah, you know, so find your place in life, you know? So I feel like that and also my Jewish relatives you know, I'm a little older than you, my mother was into Communism. She was half-Jewish on the wrong side, [Laughter]. And she was probably a member of the communist party at some point. She's been dead 18 years now so I can't ask her for sure, but I bet she was at least briefly. You know? So I feel like you come from that whole union Jewish communist sort of 30s era background and there's a bit of that culture left. It's sort of—it's gradually being lost, I feel like, but in New York there's kind of a lot of it left. So I wanted to come to New York for that, to be a part of um the workman—do they call it Workmen's Circle still? I think they do, just like the worker's circle. In Yiddish, that's not a gendered thing because it's Der Arbeter Ring, which means

worker's circle. But in English they translate it as Workmen's Circle, and I think it's still called that a lot. You know, I studied Yiddish a little bit at the Worker's Circle in Brookline. So um, so to be part of that culture, to be Jewish, to be in a larger queer community, Boston is compartmentalized, racially and you know, I lived in a neighborhood that used to be cool and gay back in like the 70s, but it's been gentrified so much now it's mostly students and sort of Eurotrash, like ours is—I live in Fenway, it's—

Lenni: Lived.

Katz: Yeah, lived.

Lenni: [Laughter].

Katz: But you know what, I still, I feel split, you know?

Lenni: Mmm.

Katz: Because my house is still there and I go there like, still like twice a month probably, so. And I own my house and I've lived there since I was 12.

Lenni: Wow.

Katz: So I have an apartment, but that's my home since I was 12 and [Laughter] yeah.

Lenni: Wow. And what do you notice about New York, being a newcomer? What do you see about it that you like, in what ways do you see it that maybe other people don't because you're new to it?

Katz: You know, it blows my mind how many people there are here. And as a result of that, any little subculture that you want a part of, there's so many people. And right away, I went to The Center, and um—oh this was a good story. So I went to The Center to the Bureau of General Services Queer Division, the little bookstore that rents a spot upstairs in The Center, because they were having a sort of like, oh, Michigan Women's Music Festival ended, let's talk about our memories of Michigan Women's Music Festival and like sort of have a post-mortem for it. So this was a sparsely attended event. There were probably only three people who'd actually been to the festival there, and one of them was the person running the thing and one was me, a trans guy who looks masculine at this point. And um, and there were almost warring factions. There was a person there who knows people who are trying to buy the land, who want to keep it trans, TERF, you know, trans exclusionary radical feminists who want to buy the land, and there's also another group of women trying to buy the land who are not trans women exclusionary. And I don't know, I don't think either one has succeeded yet because I think I would have heard, but it was interesting because there was—and everybody was very polite, you know? Like I talked about my memories of it and everything. But um, as a result of being in this incredible space, the Bureau is a beautiful space with a few gay men, about six lesbians, and some people I couldn't



categorize. I'm so used to categorizing everything, that's one thing that's kind of weird about the whole trans thing right now is you have to accept that you can't categorize people and I often use things like, you know, looks like what I used to call a lesbian, as a result of like that. And uh, so I'm in this space and I'm like okay I love this space and they need volunteers, so I volunteered and I worked in a bookstore for 20 years. So right away I get a whole shift, like open and close, like run the cash register, like count the money, like everything. And I almost resent it, because it's like, that's my frickin' job, that's what I actually got paid like too little for for 20 years, you know? Like I was like, and I don't—I've gotten over it, I love it, I love volunteering and doing it, but I'm like, I have a job, like, volunteering at this place that doesn't make any money, and that we need so desperately like we've got to have devoted volunteers, because there's no queer bookstore in New York anymore, this is the one. And it's not making—

Lenni: Except for maybe Bluestockings.

Katz: Yeah, I don't think they identify as queer though, I think they identify as Anarchist.

Lenni: Anarchist intersectional, yeah.

Katz: But they have a very good queer—they're pretty good.

Lenni: True, very true.

Katz: So you've got Bluestockings and the Bureau. And those are going to be major places for me in New York. So I'm at the Bureau and I'm meeting all kinds of queers. Trans people, like, every variety, right? And that's when Christian and Kai came in and they were trying to hang up posters for the Transgenerational Theater Project. You know, I did some theater in high school, you know? Like, I haven't done any since, but I was like that just sounds like so much fun, and a place where I can meet a bunch of trans people. But when I got here, the variety of trans people, the fact that—because you know, you have a trans event in Boston, it's going to be a very white event. At least the ones that I hear about, you know? And here, we had like 50% people of color. And the age thing, because of SAGE, the trans elders, the older adults as we call them here, I mean, it just felt like an honor, like such an honor to be able to be in a space with this many cool queers of different races and different ages and different gender presentations, all varieties on the spectrum. Because we had about 30 people. You know? And I feel like now that I'm in, you know, now that I sort of have a few like little points of entry to the trans and queer community in New York, it's just going to grow and I didn't have that kind of possibility in Boston. You know, the possibility for more queer space in Boston was mostly like, okay, you could go to the bars, you know? So um, so I'm excited about it because I think I might want to work in it, you know? I think like if I could find a way to do peer counseling or something like that, that that would be something that I actually enjoy as a job. And I've been trying to figure out what the fuck that would be. Excuse my French.

Lenni: [Laughter]. Well that's a great segue into like, how I wanted to sort of close, was just like asking about your future and where you envision yourself? Like both like your gender, like do you

feel like you're done transitioning? You know what I mean? Like do you feel like your gender is still evolving or is it like, I'm at my place and I'm like, evolving in other ways, or do you feel like um—because I know it's been a long process, but I also know people like are on forever journeys with themselves, you know what I mean? Um, so I'm curious like how you see your gender in like 10 years as like, an older adult, right? Or like, in 10 years you'll be in the SAGE catch age, right?

Katz: Yeah, yeah.

Lenni: So like where do you see yourself at that point? Both as a trans person but like as a human in New York City or wherever you'll be?

Katz: My gut feeling is that I'll be me, like, pretty much the way I am now. But what I like is, I don't have to, you know, I don't have to be. If I feel like doing something else, than I'll change.

Lenni: Mmhmm.

Katz: And it's like Kate Bornstein to me, you know? Like I'm not a man, I'm not a woman, and I don't have to be anything. No fucking thing do I have to be. I'm going to be who I feel like being at a given moment, and I'm not in any doubt about that. and I think that's going to be roughly who I am now, but I might be wrong. And if I should decide to do something else, then great. I'll do it, you know? So I'm totally stoked about my trans possibilities. In terms of working, I just went to some of the group—I just went to the gender non-conforming group at The Center, and it was really good and I thought I want to like lead these groups or something. And like, I would like to learned the you know, the transmasculine or the gender non-conforming, I'd like to do that sort of thing or peer counseling or any way I could help trans people, old trans people, young trans people, I don't know like queers too, you know? Whatever. I could do that kind of thing. And I don't have the relevant degrees for any of that, so I don't know how I'm going to break into it, but I think maybe I'll just shine at it so much that somebody will let me under the thing or maybe there will be some short program I can force myself through. Yeah.

Lenni: Um, hmm. Is there anything—how are you feeling about this interview and the things that you've shared and anything you reflected on as you've been speaking that may be a surprise to you?

Katz: I'm like, we never got back to that thing at the beginning but I—

Lenni: Mmm yeah, what do you want to go back to?

Katz: To skip, I'm like what was that?

Lenni: You were like talking about your gender, how do you see your gender, yeah?

Katz: Oh yes. I need to say a story about this.

Lenni: Please.

Katz: So my—when I was a kid, I think that I thought I was a boy. And I had some little storybooks, very 1960s with very gendered little boys and little girls. One in particular, they were playing on a tugboat. Like they were on a tugboat that was just giving them a tour, and the girls were being very principal and sort of like with their skirts like, not climbing up everything, you know? And the boys were running all over, climbing up everything. And everything about the boys was who I wanted to be. So if you said that today, if that kid was there today and their parents were at all listening to them, they would get tracked as trans immediately. So I actually think that I would be a man if that had been possible in the late 60s. And when I was five, I actually wished in front of my parents in a wishing well to be a boy, and nobody paid any attention to this. No attention to this kind of thing was ever given. So about my gender, I would have been a trans man. I would have been one who said I'm a man, I'm just a man, and that's who I am. And if I had all my childhood to prepare for that I'm sure I'd be very comfortable being a man. That's who I wanted to be when I was a kid. After 20 years of lesbian culture, being like my primary home in life, I'm not that boy anymore. I'm not that little boy who just wants to be a boy. I loved lesbian culture. I had a great time being a lesbian. I don't disavow those years at all, they were fun. I didn't know that there was something else I could be or do, and I had a great time. And I don't identify as a man, but that's why I'm so masculine. [Laughter]. I'm like oh, yeah, this is who I'm comfortable being, but I just still identify as a lesbian.

Lenni: [Laughter].

Katz: Like, I'm a lesbian, too bad. If I'm too transmasculine for you and you don't think I am, I know I am. So that's my identity.

Lenni: Yes. [Laughter]. Okay. I'm going to close it there. Does that sound good?

Katz: Yeah, let's close it. It was good.

Lenni: Okay, alright. Thanks, Kyle.

Katz: Thanks, Lenni.

Lenni: [Whispering] pause.