

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

JULIAN HONKASALO

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Vanessa Thompson

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello! My name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Julian Honkasalo 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 16th 2018 and this is being recorded at the NYU department of Sociology. Hello!

Julian Honkasalo: Hi

O'Brien: How are you doing today?

Honkasalo: I'm doing really good, thanks.

O'Brien: So you said you're a little jet lagged, tell me about how you arrived here today.

Honkasalo: Yeah I'm a little jet lagged I flew in from Helsinki last night, and I came actually, to New York City to, learn about the project.

O'Brien: Wow! Have you spent time in New York City before?

Honkasalo: Yes, um, I moved to New York city in 2008, I actually got a full ride scholarship and I came here to actually do a one year as an exchange student at the new school of social research in philosophy. But then I applied to the PhD program and I switched to politics, political science. And then I ended up staying, all together 10 years. I graduated, and I saw my home University's the university of Helsinki, the gender studies there but because of the situation with the funding I was doing some work in Helsinki and then also in New York. So the last year of my stay I was living both in Finland and in the States. So sort of going back and forth. But yeah I've been around, I've lived in New York City for almost 10 years.

O'Brien: And what interested you to find out more about the New York City Trans Oral Project?

Honkasalo: I was actually originally at the beach, in Brooklyn, and I saw posters of the New York City Oral History Project but somebody had printed black and white posters, I took a screenshot and I was like this looks really interesting. Obviously I'm aware of the Stonewall movement and the history of not only trans history but lesbian and gay history in the city. So it was something that I looked up and I think they had just started that project then. And you know I kept it in mind but I didn't think about, you know conducting interviews at that point. It was just something I wanted to follow up on, wanted to see if they actually had something published or actually available online. So it was actually by accident that I found it originally.

O'Brien: and you said that you had some interest in trying to think about a project like this in Finland?

Honkasalo: Yeah, yeah I was um, since my postdoctoral work Helsinki deals with, trans history in the Nordic context. But its the history of legislation, about how Sweden for example, was the first

country in the world in 1972 to pass a law to recognize trans as a legal identity group, and they passed varying sets of laws to legalize gender transitioning. So they also added a clause on sterilization so sterilization became a condition for receiving legal confirmation. So doing archival research, looking into different historical archives and also other sources, and then the more I was doing research in it, the more that I wanted to look into how this story continues. And what's going to happen once, at some point, we will have law reform. You know Sweden already had it, but in Finland we still have a law that's violating basic human rights and we want legal reform. But at the same time I was looking for something, you know, some more stories where I could hear all the time from trans community. So a project that would also in Finland record stories and life stories as they are told by members of the community themselves.

O'Brien: Wonderful. I was thinking we could shift gears and talk about your life

Honkasalo: Yeah

O'Brien: Tell me about your growing up, where were you born and what was your childhood like?

Honkasalo: I was born in Helsinki, which is the capital of Finland, and I grew up on a countryside about an hours drive from Helsinki, small, small... it's basically a town. We had goats and chickens, and you know almost like a small farm. I was really happy as a kid, I was very active because there's so much woods, lakes, the environment was something, nature was part of...always when I think about my childhood I think about the endless forests and space, of just being able to move around a lot. So yeah, I was born into 1980, and my childhood was very happy. As a kid I identified mostly as gender neutral until the age of about 6. So before that when I'm thinking about my own memory I don't think I related to any gender, it wasn't something that I was thinking about. And then at the age of 6 I felt strongly that I was a boy. I wasn't assigned a boy at birth. I wanted to cut my hair short, my parents were supportive of me, they wanted to give me space, they wanted to see how my own way of expressing myself would be like how I would develop, so they weren't pushing me towards any direction. So that period between 6 years and 12 was really happy, I had friends in school, kids in my school were okay with it, they were just thinking this kids is just different but it's one of us.

O'Brien: What were your parents jobs? How did they spend their time?

Honkasalo: My mom's a doctor, so she's a scholar in medical anthropology. And my dad until he retired was in environmental policy, in environmental protection, administering the environment. Mostly relating to reducing noise pollution. My mother was doing different kinds of research projects, but she's in the academia, she's a professor she has a long career in medical anthropology.

O'Brien: Do you have a sense of why they were supportive of you from 6-12?

Honkasalo: That's a really good question. We haven't really discussed that so much. I had a phase when I was older, 16 or 17 when I was asking about my childhood, and why did they support me

in this and they just said that's how they felt how you should bring up any child. But we have discussed that there was some pressure from adults they knew, to you know put your kid in therapy, what if this is a sign of some serious personality disorder or psychosis or something like that. So now that I'm older I've been thinking what it's like to bring up a gender non conforming child in an environment where there was no knowledge about this. So both of them were highly educated, they both have academic degrees and they were in the social justice movement both of them when they were young, so I think it comes from there, but that's a really good question. Those are questions that I'm thinking about now that I'm older and there's a lot of talk about trans kids and gender non conforming kids, kids who are still looking for ways to express themselves. So I'm thinking about that too, what it was like to raise a kid and give a supportive environment for a child who is different.

O'Brien: Do you have a sense that the movements, you mentioned that your parents were a part of movements, what the relationship was between their political practice and the gay and lesbian movements or other sexual minorities or women's rights or certain politics of gender besides trans issues.

Honkasalo: Definitely feminism. My dad has been a spokesperson and has been active in gender equality and feminist leftist social justice movements in Finland and my mother too. So the sort of leftist feminism, definitely that there. I don't know how much anybody talked about, I mean looking at the history of course, lesbian and gay history in Finland. But my understanding is that it wasn't such a big part of the leftist movement. Of course the idea, I think international solidarity with other groups too than working class groups, so it was always something, a peace movement, a solidarity movement, but definitely yeah, yeah, and ocean of feminist men and specific, not just mainstream gender equality although I respect that position as well, but maybe something that today we would call intersectional, it was already there in the 70's movement.

O'Brien: You mentioned wanting to cut your hair short, and knowing you were a boy. Do you remember any conversations with your parents when you were a child on these issues?

Honkasalo: I mean I remember that I was about 6 and I was in daycare and I became really good friends with this kid who was a young boy, and we became really good friends. And I remember that the toys he was playing with I thought they were really really cool. And I remember I felt somehow very liberated about the kind of games that we were playing, not just hide and seek, but all those games in one sense or another, now that I think back on it, involved you know just being active, doing things, building things, pulling this apart. So we would play with little, what are they called? GI Jane, GI Joes, I don't remember what they were, soldiers things like that. But also with cars, he-man figures, we didn't think of those toys as related to violence or militarism obviously but they were definitely action figures so all those toys were people who could do something, and they could change things. So cutting my hair short, I remember that it had a lot to do with the fact that I met this guys and we became best friends and I wanted to be like him. But I think it was more, like a way I found to articulate myself, that this is who I want to be. Of course, I mean it must have been quite dramatic, for my parents too. I don't remember that there was any drama around it, but I think we had a discussion like what is this about, why do you want

to do it, but I was very very strong in my way of saying this is what I want to do. And then quite soon after that I started demanding that I want to dress, I mean they never dressed me very feminine anyway, I was... kids back then wore more gender neutral clothing anyway, so it wasn't anything that was particularly...they didn't dress me in a gender neutral way but I don't think the switch to boys clothes was that big because I was dressing, kids, boys and girls were dressing in jeans and sneakers and shirts anyways so it wasn't a big deal when you were a kid.

O'Brien: And what were your teenage years like? You said 6-12 was pretty good and then what happened?

Honkasalo: Then it got challenging, at some point, I mean at the age of 12, kids in Finland change to a different school. First you are in this sort of elementary school from the age 6-12, and then after that you move to a high school. And in the little country side town where I grew up there was only a school for kids 6-12. So when you wanted to continue you had to pick between to other towns, and I deliberately made a very dramatic choice that I wanted to go to a school where most of my friends, they wouldn't go there and I decided that I need to change. The social pressure was coming from the outside. I wasn't being perceived any longer, the way I had been perceived. Kids were growing up, it wasn't house parties, there isn't any alcohol involved obviously when we were 12, but there were different kinds of like social things that have to do with heteronormativity. Finding like a guy that you like, or a girl that you like, things like that. And then the older boys were making comments to me, like what are you going to do? Are you going to continue like that? So I switched schools and I made the very dramatic decision that I was going to start trying to look like a girl should look like. And in high school I was bullied, by these older teenage guys who were about 16 years old, they used to practice ice hockey tackles on me against the locker rooms. But at the same time I did have friends, I was doing sports, so my own age group, they were cool with me, but it was the older guys who started getting violent. And there were also questions like are you a boy or a girl? And whatever you would answer to those questions, it was always...there was no way to answer that. If you said that you were a boy, then they would say okay, we're going to strip you and see if you are really a boy or not. And if you would say that you were a girl then they would say, why the fuck do you look like that? So the risk of physical violence, it wasn't in the small town school where I was at, it didn't happen in there, but I was picking up signals, that I don't feel safe. And so in high school, I've been thinking about it later, like what goes in the mind of a 12 or a 13 year old kid who makes these decisions, and just starts conforming to gender norms that are clearly not aligned to the way that the kid has been living for a very long time. And then losing all your friends, starting everything new and trying to build it just to protect yourself. Kids pick up signals, they can read signals.

O'Brien: How did you learn about gender, trans...did you have any exposure to trying to think about this stuff at all as you were growing up?

Honkasalo: Yeah I mean...back then, not really. I mean when I was young I remember having thoughts that I have later discovered were thoughts that many trans persons have. I remember having thoughts like why am I like this? This is really weird, nobody else is like this. But then it was sort of, it gets psychologically exhausting, so you sort of just forget it and then go you go on

about your daily business. And then it pops up again somewhere else, like I'm really different, nobody else is like this. I remember that one person I thought was really cool was Freddie Mercury, so Queen was around, and there were these characters in the arts and music industry, maybe also Michael Jackson, to a certain extent, I don't know, and later Ruel Paul, and also some figures in the rock music, women who were in the rock industry, they were able to transplace, like Patti Smith, later to transform norms, so there were those people that I would look too but definitely Freddie Mercury was somebody that I thought was doing something very different. I didn't know that this was called trans, there were no words for it, I mean I was called, when I was being bullied or harassed, the boys would call me tranny, but nobody ever called me a faggot or a dyke. So it was specifically targeted, I don't know where they picked it up, but I didn't really understand what it meant, I thought that they meant, what I thought was a transvestite, and I thought that's a man that dresses in womens clothes, and I was thinking they got it all wrong, because I'm not a man that dresses in womens clothes, like these guys they mix everything up. So there wasn't any words, queer became a part of my vocabulary much later, like when I was in my 20's in University. Back then I think I just picked up stuff from the music and arts industry, because that's where the creative...I mean there were like cis heterosexual people who were transforming gender norms in some way, I mean obviously David Bowie was one of them too, Prince was somebody who was very interesting.

O'Brien: So you were oriented towards rock music for a sense of gender freedom? Tell us about that

Honkasalo: I started listening to rock music partly because my dad was listening to a lot of Blues. And he listened to a lot of 70's music too, like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and I remember asking him questions like who is this person? This sounds really cool, and then my parents bought me a guitar, I think I was 12, maybe a little bit younger, so I would ask them questions about who were they listening too, and also about, I remember a conversation I had in the car with my dad about Freddie Mercury, it was the first time I heard Freddie Mercury sing on the car radio and it was *The Show Must Go On*, and I remember I asked my dad, whos this woman and what is this song about? What is it about because its so sad. And then he explained to me that this man has a disease, and illness that he's going to die from, and this is his last recording and thats why its so sad, and we talked about, and I said to him, well his voice is so beautiful. So the music, it came from interaction with my dad.

O'Brien: Did you continue to engage with rock over time?

Honkasalo: Yeah I continued playing guitar until I was about 16 or 17, folk music, it changed, I listened to a lot of different kinds of music, also Jazz, Folk, Punk music. All kinds of... I listened later to a lot of hip hop, I was just always curious to what's going on. And lately I think, I've been discussing this with my friends, that um the more commercialized music becomes the less I've been actively listening to it. But yeah it's definitely something that I do...I haven't played guitar in a long time, partly because I haven't had time, or I haven't made time for myself, but it's something that I definitely want to continue doing.

O'Brien: So your dad had some influence, inspiration for you around your engagement with music. What was he like?

Honkasalo: He is somebody who I think... I think both of my parents are...I mean one thing that I think about first when I think about them is always, ethics, like what I think is one of the most important things that I learn from them is just ethics related to social justice and things like that. My dad is really tall, and he did a lot of stuff around the house, we grew up on the countryside, so there was stuff like you know, chopping wood and things like that, so he would take me with him fishing, we did a lot of things together, and my mother as well. I think like living on the countryside is something that makes you, I mean if your not actually living on a farm and you have to work there, but you just have it as something that you like doing, its very engaging. There's a lot of opportunities to do stuff together. He's also somebody who has read a lot of books, and who always reads, he's always reading a new bood. So he's like a walking encyclopedia, if you don't know something, or you wonder about something, you know I can still ask him about stuff, I think one thing they did really well when I was a kid was that there were always involving me in things. Like if they had guests over, and they would have dinner, they would encourage us, and welcome us to the dinner table even though we were kids, and we would sit there and if we had questions we were allowed to participate and then we would leave and go play or something like that.

O'Brien: Did you have exposure to music scenes or music communities in your teenage years, did you become a part of any community of fans around music?

Honkasalo: No, not really I didn't have a band, it was mostly something that I did by myself. When I was 16 for a while we had a ska band, I was in highschool and I went to Cambridge Rindge latin school, because my mom spent on year as a visiting fellow at Harvard Medical School, medical anthropology. So I went to Cambridge Rindge Latin school which is a public school, but its very international community in Cambridge, in Boston. So there I had a band there for a while.

O'Brien: How old were you?

Honkasalo: I was 16. I think actually things got better when we moved, when I was 16 we moved to the U.S. So my high school years in Finland, I was actually lucky to get out of school in one piece. And I was fine. It wasn't like the bullying, it was here and there, but I also had my own friends, good friends, I did sports, and I mean we had, like teenagers, we had house parties and so, I have good memories from high school too. But I think things definitely got better once we moved out of Finland and when I was 16 I was exposed to this international community of students at cambridge.

O'Brien: So your family moved to the United States, you were 16 and you spent a year going to school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Did you go back to Finland?

Honkasalo: We actually moved to Sweden from there, after a year and a half. And there I was in Gothenburg.

O'Brien: And you finished high school in Sweden?

Honkasalo: Yeah

O'Brien: And where did you go after high school?

Honkasalo: I went back to Helsinki, and then I was working for a couple years and I applied to the University and then I got accepted to study philosophy and I did my undergrad in philosophy. And then after that I applied for the full ride and I got it and then I came back to the U.S. So my history is very....it involves a lot of moving from one place to another.

O'Brien: How were those years for you? Working in Helsinki and going to school for philosophy?

Honkasalo: Those were definitely....I mean I really enjoyed reading philosophy. That was something that was....it wasn't like a plan really, I was into theater at first and play writing, but then the more playwrights I kept reading I noticed there was a lot of questions relating to philosophy. And then I was reading philosophy and I was reading political philosophy too. Those were good years. There was some homophobia in the university also among other students so there was bullying there too. And harassment. Not physical harassment but verbal harassment. But the university solved that issue and things were...it got better.

O'Brien: Did you start encountering queer community up in Eastwood during those years?

Honkasalo: No, no I wasn't. That's a good question. I think I was actually more interested in the anti-globalization movement.

O'Brien: What years was this?

Honkasalo: This was around Seattle Riots

O'Brien: '99?

Honkasalo: Yeah 2000, early 2000 until 2005. This is really interesting now that you asked me that question because gender studies was around, there was queer studies, it was just like I didn't feel like I wanted too... I took a couple of classes but I didn't want to go there. But something that I was thinking about was I was worried that I was too close to something that I don't want to talk about. I wasn't out and after those years in the Finnish high school I had learned how to live as a woman, I was trying to do that and it was going okay. So I felt like, I must have somehow known that this is a Pandora's box that I don't want to open. It's really interesting how you are capable of suppressing something so deep that you...I think it's just really interesting, like how does that happen? It wasn't until much later that I discovered my transness again.

O'Brien: When did that happen?

Honkasalo: Well this was when I had already moved to New York City to study. And I hope I'm being coherent because there's a lot of moving from one place to another but at some point when I was studying at the new school I discovered...I think what happened is I went to a gym, just a regular gym to start doing some exercising and working out and there was a personal trainer who started doing these boxing classes for us, and then he did, one time he did sparring, and we were allowed to participate and then I enjoyed that so much that I decided I wanted to join a real boxing gym. So I joined Mendes boxing which is close to Harold Square, it is run by Mexican fighters. And then after that I went to Kingsway Boxing which unfortunately doesn't exist anymore, it closed. I was training with a really wonderful training called Darryl Pure. It was actually at Kingsway boxing when I was doing shadow boxing, I was seeing my own figure in the mirror, I was enjoying what I was doing. In those places you always mix guys and girls, it's like a place where, at least where I was, I don't know if this is....you know I can't say that for every gym but that particular gym and that particular trainer was treating us all the same. You would spar against guys, guys would spar against girls, we would train different things, so different body types, different heights, different sizes would train different skills. And the language that he used was always very gender neutral. And during the year, I think about a year when I was training, something just started clicking, that this is what my body wants to do and then I was seeing my own self in the mirror everyday, because everyday we would shadow box. And then I started looking, and I had this weird feeling that there's something very familiar with the mirror image, there's something that's been missing for a long time. And then I started, you know I was at home and I started thinking that this is the kid who I was, but the kid has grown up. And I had this really strange feeling that I was thinking, that the child who I was, who I sort of left behind partly when I went to high school is back. And I hadn't seen him in many years and he's grown up and he's really tall. And this was the thoughts that I had in my head, and then I was thinking it felt good. I wasn't freaked out, and yeah I continued boxing and then I started very gently exploring this thing. Like what is this about? And I think that what happened is that I was sort of old enough, I was 20...no wait 30, so I felt you know more comfortable exploring what it was.

O'Brien: So this was the mid 2000s?

Honkasalo: This was 2010 and...no wait it was later, 2013,yeah around that time.

O'Brien: And you were...you'd gone into the new school in political...politics program. Masters program?

Honkasalo: I was in the PhD program.

O'Brien: PhD. And what was New York like for you in general?

Honkasalo: Well the thing with the new school of politics department was there was a lot of international students, and there also a small group of queer students and we had a student conference on queer in the university. We invited Jessica [inaudible] before she was famous you know, well she probably was but not as famous as now. And Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz was there. And it was really nice just doing that conference. And during that time the marriage

equality movement started building up. So there was queer students, a lot of activism going on. The queer students at the new school were very intersectional, and we were discussing different issues related to racism in the United States, and also class, and global solidarity.

O'Brien: [inaudible] A group then?

Honkasalo: I'm not actually sure, probably. And act opt. Members from VisualAIDS was also some people that we hang out with. So New York City at that point, there was a very lively queer and lesbian community, run by, well some of the promoters are Sabrina Haley and Ellie Conant who unfortunately passed away. But they were doing these parties because the lesbian community they didn't have enough money for their own...there wasn't like a nightclub for that specific lesbian community. I mean there was like, places in Brooklyn and of course Stonewall but there was different kinds of nights. And I think the first party that I went too was at Chelsea Hotel, which has been closed already. That's where, you know, Sid Vicious was doing horrible, tragic, set of events. But anyway, that was an underground sort of community that was also very active, and then there was the university students so those too.

O'Brien: Tell us about these underground communities. What was the names of the parties? What was the years that you know about it? What were the parties like?

Honkasalo: We didn't really have student queer parties. So I was kind of having two hats, or you know there was the nightlife community of queers in New York who were not in academia. And then there was the academic group whom I knew. So I was kind of like, two very different worlds. But there were questions obviously that were related. The party scene wasn't just a party scene, it was a way to get together. And it was also the marriage equality movement for example, wasn't just about getting married, it was about getting access to rights in the New York State. I think...I saw a list back then that you would have access to 700 different rights if you were married, where if you weren't you wouldn't have those so there's a book by Nancy Polikoff I think it's called *Beyond Gay and Straight Marriage* which is really good. And she tells about this whole marriage institution and what it involves in the United States. So for me, coming from Finland where we have certain rights are guaranteed just by being citizens. I mean we have so far at the moment, it's been unraveled by our new liberal government. But we have public health care, and free higher education. So when I learned from these activists, what marriage involves, I thought you know, that's the reason why their pushing it. I mean nobody knew what was gonna happen, what a backlash. Maybe some people were expecting it but you know, the whole backlash with the conservative movements and Trump and what's happening in Europe. But anyway those things were happening. And I think also because New York City is so international, it gave me a lot of opportunities and possibilities to just sort of free flow, improvise, you know be myself. And find a way of expressing who I felt that I was was.

O'Brien: I still want to hear about these parties. What were the names of the parties?

Honkasalo: [laughter] Well one was choice cunts that was at Santos party house, and then there was snap shot, the first one I think was at The Delancey, I remember one night Queen—

O'Brien: I went to a few of those

Honkasalo: You went to a few of those yeah. Queen Latifah was spinning records one night. Then of course Stonewall. For me probably Snapshot, and then Choice Cunts, those were the two that I used to go too, just to meet friends. The good thing about Choice Cunts, and Snapshot too, is a lot of times they would have special nights with theme, or sort of involving masquerade, like dress parties. So you would dress up...there was a Lady Gaga party and everyone would dress up as something related to the video or something. Then there was a lot of clubs and special nights that I don't remember anymore what the names were but there were parties with gay men, trans persons, lesbians, and drag queens, they would mix. So at some point I think that got a little segregated, and it started to be kind of more cliquish, because everybody in the community has their own cliques. But there were definitely, like the one at Chelsea party which name, I don't remember what it was, but it was definitely mixed. Everybody was there, and it was this queer utopia for that one night. [laughter]

O'Brien: So this is like 2015?

Honkasalo: Yeah, I think the whole time from 2010 to 2015 or so.

O'Brien: And so your engaging in the queer student scene at the new school, and these queer parties. And within that are you starting to engage or think about trans people?

Honkasalo: Yeah I think so

O'Brien: What was that like?

Honkasalo: There was both familiarity and unfamiliarity. So on one hand I did relate to a lot of...you know for example you know the activism and stuff that the persons in the lesbian community were doing, but then on the other hand I also felt that there was something more. I didn't always feel like it matched, I didn't always feel at home. So it was both familiarity and distance. And then there were of course trans men coming to those parties as well, and talking to some of them. And then some students also at the new school. So I think like, all those things together....it wasn't like, I don't have...a lot of people having a coming out story like that this was the moment that I...you know it was more like it gradually just, I was sort of unlearning a lot of heteronormative and gender-normative stuff that I had learned. And as that became undone something just started sort of like flowing, or that's just how it happened.

O'Brien: What would you say the labels, or identities that you would have claimed? Like when you first moved to New York, after you'd been here a year, two years, three years? How would you have identified yourself and how did that change over time?

Honkasalo: So like right now?

O'Brien: When you first moved here compared to now, and what were the different identities that you might have been comfortable with?

Honkasalo: I think when I first moved to the U.S. and I started school, I think I identified myself as something like bisexual. But then I felt that that term was insufficient because it didn't really express who I was. I mean I have a background where I when I was a kid I dated a couple of guys for a while. I mean that was when I was really young, 14, 15. But that whole identity I thought somehow it was weird to categorize myself that way. But I definitely wasn't straight. So first I was trying to look for a home within those categories that are constructed to sexual identities. So there are ways of you know, identities become identities by being [inaudible] what a person feels like as their sexual identity. But there was still a lot of missing from like where's gender in all this? And I think a lot of trans that I've heard their stories later, or read about it even in history books struggle with the same thing. So a lot of us were either trying to find familiarity or find a home within these categories that were only based on sexuality, when probably our sexuality was just as diverse as our gender. I'm not saying that everybody's genderqueer I'm just saying there's a lot of going back and forth there. And then later gradually I came to realize that no this is not who I am, it's more related to gender, that these challenges and these issues that I've had in my life have had more to do with trying to live as the gendered person that I am. And then I was going back to my childhood and my teenage years and trying to think and I was always like I was still a boy, a young boy or a young man. But then with that because I'm a feminist, and I had read a lot of stuff on queer feminism, I was also constantly having challenges with the whole idea of okay does that mean a heterosexual white man? I mean whiteness and race and those categories also came to play a role. So I don't know if there is a term for that but now I would call myself a trans guy, but somehow also queer in a lot of ways. I never lost that queerness in me. But I don't understand queerness necessarily as related to sexuality. I see it more as a way of living, sometimes as a way of surviving. And even though I say that with huge privilege of being a highly educated white person from Northern Europe, still survival....trying to avoid violence, trying to make yourself intelligible in front of persons who don't recognize you as a human being. That involves struggle.

O'Brien: And were your studies related? What were you studying at the new school? What kind of questions were you grappling with and interested in for your research?

Honkasalo: I wasn't really looking into questions of gender so much, but it was definitely of oppression, violence. I came to the new school with a dissertation proposal on Hannah Arendt, who is a Jewish Marxist thinker, leftist thinker. And she wrote this amazing book on totalitarianism, so somehow I was fascinated with the different forms of oppression that crystallized with the totalitarian movement and of course Nazis and so I was working with her. But her thinking has a lot of Foucault elements, there's still remnants of Marxism although she's critical of Marx in sometimes strange ways. So yeah there were questions in my own work that were definitely related to oppression, all kinds of groups who are oppressed.

O'Brien: Do you want to say more about how your research evolved during your time at the new school?

Honkasalo: Yeah, so I wrote my dissertation, it's called *Superfluous Lives: An Arendtian Critique of Biopolitics* so I was reading a lot of Foucault, I was looking at the ways and structures of power that make certain groups of people, or render them as disposable, as inhuman as something that's not needed. So superfluous in that way, superfluous labor, superfluous human beings. The history of eugenics was playing a part in that because that whole movement has to do with categorizing people and Foucault's biopolitics also, how the control of the body becomes the control of the population. But also forms of resistance. And then when I was reading the origins, I found sections where she talks about the history of discrimination of gays and jews, and the effeminacy, how feminine men or persons who were considered as feminine, how that became a category that had to be destroyed. And then I found the question of trans history. So it's actually interesting that my interest in trans history didn't actually come from reading books in trans history, but it became interesting by finding those things in the history of totalitarianism.

O'Brien: Great. So your at the new school doing some queer student organizing, and going to these parties, and beginning to shift how your thinking about yourself. What happened when you finished at the new school?

Honkasalo: I went back to Finland, like during my last year. So I also have a PhD from gender studies from Finland, that feminist interpretations of Hannah Arendt, and it was a project that I was doing-

O'Brien: That was after this?

Honkasalo: That was actually before.

O'Brien: Before?

Honkasalo: So I came to the new school to do my dissertation, but because of funding situations I ended up going back to Finland and teaching and doing a whole PhD degree there. Which has been quite heaving, but its done.

O'Brien: So different PhD's

Honkasalo: Yeah, one in gender studies and one in political science

O'Brien: So you moved into going deeper into these gender questions?

Honkasalo: Yeah and the dissertation on gender studies in Helsinki that's actually where I discovered the question that I'm dealing with in my post doc research that I'm doing now. So that has to do with trans history and the history of sterilization legislation, and resistance also coming from the trans community throughout history to certain ways of categorizing us. So after graduating I went back to Finland, I have a contract now, I got a scholarship for 4 years to do the post doctoral history project and one year funding in the project. So at the moment I'm based in

Finland and I'm conducting research there. And that has to do with, I'm looking at medical archives and the history of activism. And basically its from early 1920's and forward. And mostly what I find interesting is from 60's and 70's. But there's bits and pieces here and there. I'm not making a very strict timeline for myself, because a lot of times when you go into archives you end up reading a lot of stuff, and you might find something that you really weren't looking for at all but it was really interesting. And that's how I wrote, you know that's how I've written papers or notes on something that's not directly related. But that's what I did after.

O'Brien: Did you start to become a part of trans communities when you moved back to Helsinki?

Honkasalo: Yeah, last year I was 2 months in Sweden doing archival research in Sweden on the history of the trans law. And when I came back to Finland I knew that I have sort of a temporary permanent position. I mean it's not permanent but at the moment it's at least something that's pretty solid. And I wanted to get involved with activism and NGO. And it wasn't really...my intention wasn't really too... it wasn't like I want to be an activist. It was more like how can I give something back to the community from what I'm finding in these archives and what I'm finding in my research and is there any way that I can use the platform that I have? Because obviously as a scholar I get invited to places to talk, I can submit papers, sometimes I get them accepted, I can go to conferences so politics or social justice activism isn't always opposed to fear. So yeah I'm involved with an NGO back home.

O'Brien: Tell us about that.

Honkasalo: Yeah it's an NGO called Transek. So it's basically trans rights and trans patients rights. And trying to also educate the wider public about what trans persons are going through but also about what our lives are like. Mostly at the moments its focused on trying to bring about law reform. So at the moment we still have a law, like I said earlier, you need to be going through this process of psychiatric evaluation, which is quite complex, its heavy, it takes time, it can take time from one year to several years. You need medical proof from a doctor confirming that your actually trans, and then with those papers you can apply for access to public health care to transitioning. So were just trying to lobby politicians, talk to medical professionals. I'm quite new in that NGO but they do a lot of work and some of it is visible, and some of it isn't visible. A lot of stuff happens behind the scenes. There's a lot mobilizing and working. I'm optimistic, it will take time but law reform will come at some point.

O'Brien: In the United States there's a lot of debate about what coalitions to form politically. So in a lot of places trans groups sort of evaluate that they don't have the political leverage to move legislation through and then they try to figure out how to get gay and lesbian dominated organizations to prioritize trans issues or to work on trans issues. In other places trans groups might work with labor unions or HIV organizations is a very common coalition. Do you have a sense of how the NGO in Finland your working with relates to other social movement organizations or advocacy groups?

Honkasalo: Yeah, yeah you mentions for example HIV activism is something quite new but we have cooperations with these clinics that do anonymous free testing for individuals, so raising awareness for possible trans clients. Then there's also, some of our members are involved in feminist politics. We don't get funding, were from the government so we work on a very voluntary basis, but a lot of us are engaged with social justice issues in general, so it is intersectional. There are...there's one very big LGBT organization in Finland, so of course the movements are interlinked but I think the trans community has gained more self confidence to express the needs that are trans specific. Because at the moment for example, access to healthcare is a very complex process. And even just having therapy with persons who are actually trained to give you proper help can be challenging. So yeah the movement is working with a lot of different organizations yeah. But the front, or what were trying to sort of do at the front line is articulate trans specific issues. And that's something that's actually quite visible.

O'Brien: And are you a part of trans social network, or community, or friendship circles. Is there a community dimension to it for you?

Honkasalo: There is definitely a lot of communities, different, small friendship circles. Finland is a very small country and everyone knows everyone. But I just moved back there after being away for so many years. So I'm still sort of trying to find my place. I hadn't been there for very long, and everytime when I'm there quite soon, I mean previously I've been traveling back to the states. So at the moment, no I'm not involved so much with that. Also one thing that I've noticed is that academia, the way that it has become structured today, it's really time consuming. A lot of my time just goes to work, and then you know being with my partner, walking my dog, and seeing my family members. So I want to do something about that, and that's something that I'm thinking about a lot, that I need to take more time to establish friendships and hobbies, and things like that. It's a lot of work, and there's a very strong pressure to publish, pressure to do this and that, pressure to teach, pressure too....but you know I think within certain limits there are choices that you can make, but it's hard at the moment. But it's something that I'm starting to do there.

O'Brien: Do you have any sense of how either the trans advocacy movement or trans community differ between Finland and New York City.

Honkasalo: One thing that is definitely different is that because New York City is so diverse, there's so many different people from all over the world. So obviously there's more, I mean anti racism is definitely a part of the movement, or the trans movement but this like, queers for social justice issues that are related to structural racism and things, that's something that's happening there now, but it's been here for many, many years. I mean also because also the history of the United states, the civil rights movement, the history of slavery, the history of colonialism and this is an empire, so there are different things that have been going on here. But then within the New York City specifically I think, I would say that there are similarities, but I think that the work that we do in Finland and what we talk about, a lot of it revolves around law reform, and about the need to get a better healthcare system for both those persons who want to transition and those who just want juridical gender confirmation. So here it's different in that sense I think, and also I

think that, this is something that I've been thinking about a lot, I think that a lot of activist groups in the United States at one point they start looking at their history. And obviously I mean the Stonewall movement and that history and not only that, it's centered, a lot of that history is centered in New York City so that's obvious that people are looking into it. Also a lot of the academic trans theorizing is happening in the U.S. like Susan Stryker's Transgender History and then Mason [inaudible] work, Dean Spade, C. Riley Snorton, I mean there's a lot more Vivian Namaste. All of these classics are American professors.

O'Brien: Vivian's Canadian

Honkasalo: Oh, okay so that's my mistake [laughs] Thanks for pointing....that's true, that's true. The whole book is written in that community context. But North America, let's put it that way. But there's a lot of theorizing happening all over the world, also in the Nordic countries, but that's something that I think has....there's one thing, it's about translation. It's really interesting how these concepts that are formed in New York in the 90's like transgender, when that's carried over to a language like Finnish it's totally different. So we need to sort of work out with the American concepts and that influence, and then with some of the stuff that's coming from our own language.

O'Brien: It's very interesting. What more would you like to talk about?

Honkasalo: Um, what do I like to talk about. I think we talked a lot about a lot of things that I...I mean thanks for asking all these questions.

O'Brien: Of course

Honkasalo: One way is like the way forward, I think about that a lot. I mean with us in Finland it's about law reform, what happens after that. But I think also, in the United States like where are we going from here. It's not a question that we can answer, I mean, in the U.S. one issue that we don't have in Finland that's being discussed a lot is the whole present industrial complex and the mass detention, incarceration, that whole project, the situation of trans person of color and I don't know, this whole... I think if there's something that I would like to talk about it's this idea that I've been thinking about is that in some sense these struggles are different in different contexts, and then there's still a family resemblance between. Like the way we've been discussing earlier today, I learned a lot from what you told me about the history of the Trans History Oral Project. And it's within a very specific context like geographically, political, historical context, but there are those elements that are similar within the movement that we have in Finland and those questions of social justice. And this is not a definite thing, but I think temporality is something that's something that's very important. In one way I think that in Finland, a lot of the work that were doing is that were sort of, or what I'm hearing when I listen to people within the trans community, activists talk, a lot of that has to do with time, or temporality. Like how to have a more, or liberate temporality. Like the medicalization and pathologization of trans persons in Finland is controlling us through a time frame that's making us go through these processes where we wait and wait, for the next paper, for the next approval, or for a lot of people they don't get

approval from the doctors for example. And then there are, you know the question of sterilization has to do with time, about fertility. Even if you never thought about wanting to have kids that's not the point, the point is about the state power to decide over your body. So a lot of that temporality and this whole history project too, is like everything is happening at the moment, and everybody talks about the trans tipping point, but its like were doing history right now, it's just that we don't know it yet. We'll see maybe 10, 20 years from now what we were doing. But this question of time is something that I think is really interesting, and that's sort of related to like where are we going from here. Of course, can't know, we can only try to do something on a daily basis, little by little.

O'Brien: That sounds like it would be a great book.

Honkasalo: [laughs] Thanks

O'Brien: 'On Trans Temporality?'

Honkasalo: Yeah, and the body, the whole question of transitioning, we have different stories of transitioning, as some persons transition differently for some, it's not like an endpoint. It's like it's moving, it's movement. And I think the discourse on trans rights vs trans power and the social justice aspect of that, also the prison industrial industry. Obviously, it's not just space where... people are not just incarcerated in these places, but their life and their temporality is being controlled by these mechanisms of power so maybe trans liberation is some sense is also a new way of thinking about temporality as something that's political. It's not just space, it's also the temporality that's political.

O'Brien: Beautifully said.

Honkasalo: Sounds very philosophical but yeah, that's what I've been thinking about with this whole, because history makes you think about time.

O'Brien: Both personal history and collective history.

Honkasalo: Exactly, precisely. Because it's the persons and their times and very personal stories that are intertwined into this movement that's happening in time. And we're writing history and doing history as we're doing this.

O'Brien: Very well said for our project. Well thank you so much Julien, I really appreciated talking to you.

Honkasalo: Thank you so much, I really appreciate talking to you, and thanks for doing to project and I'm very happy to be part of this.

O'Brien: Were happy to have you

Honkasalo: Thanks!