

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**SUSAN STRYKER**

**Interviewer:** AJ Lewis

**Date of Interview:** October 22, 2019

**Location of Interview:** Apartment, Upper Westside, New York City

**Transcribed by** Sara Miller

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**AJ Lewis:** Hello, my name is AJ Lewis and I'll be having a conversation with Susan Stryker for the New York City Trans Oral History project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History program. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is October 22, 2019 and this is being recorded in Central Park West, on the Upper Westside of Manhattan. Hi Susan, how are you?

**Susan Stryker:** Doing fine, how are you?

**Lewis:** I'm pretty good. Thank you so much for your time today. I'm glad we get to chat.

**Stryker:** Well as a trans historian, I'm really happy to support a trans oral history project.

**Lewis:** I realized I've never actually interviewed someone who was a trans historian before, so you may have the capacity to judge my interviewing skills because I haven't encountered one before. (both laughing)

**Stryker:** I will hold you fully accountable.

**Lewis:** Quick start with you just briefly introduce yourself for the recorder. Tell whatever you want listeners to hear about you in a snippet and then we can kind of dive in talking about early life and move on from there.

**Stryker:** Ok, I mean I am a trans person. I'm 58 years old this year. My coming up years the words that we used about ourselves was transsexual, or later transgender. You know, now I would call myself either of those two words or a trans feminine person. I don't get too hung up on the lingo. I was a person who was assigned male at birth and no longer live that way. I'm an academic, that's my job right now. I'm here in New York because I have a visiting professorship this year at Yale University. We are living here in Manhattan, where my partner is from originally so we're just enjoying the opportunity to be on the East Coast for a while and seeing family members from here. Enjoying being in the city, cause it's a place that we both love. My day job, I'm a professor of gender and women studies at the University of Arizona, that's my regular employment. Over the past number of years at Arizona, I've had the opportunity to help build up a program in trans gender studies there, as well as a launch an academic journal *TSQ, The Transgender Studies Quarterly*. That kind of institution building or program building work within the academy is something that comes for me out of a long history of political and cultural activism on trans issues. I transitioned publicly in the early nineties, like 91, 92 [inaudible], doing cultural and political activism on trans issues is definitely something that feels like I have my own deep embodied stake in but also having this recognition that things that were difficult for me, like you know finding employment, I was really seriously under employed for many, many years. Things that were you know challenges in my life I recognized were challenges other trans people lives too. And so, it just felt both self-interested and very altruistic on another level, to just do work to like help make more space for trans academic and cultural production. Something that served me and would also serve others, you know I very much had this mentality of we have to "pull

ourselves up by each other's boot straps" and that you know collectively trans people could start to take up more space in culture, you know like find more ways to live rewarding lives. I was very committed in investing my own energies to this project of making trans lives more livable by changing what we knew about trans history to make cultural work that moved people and changed people's attitudes about trans folks, you know sometimes being more involved in direct action politics or policy orientated work and you know to me just feel very organic that I was able to use my academic training as a historian to try and move the needle on trans issues.

**Lewis:** I intend to ask you a lot more about that, but (inaudible) walk us up to how you arrived there. So, you've spent a good chunk if not most of your adult life in San Francisco, right?

But if we could, I would like to sort of walk us

**Stryker:** Yeah, I moved to San Francisco, well to the San Francisco bay area in 1983, which is when I started the PHD program in US History at UC Berkeley. As you say, it's kind of hard to go back down on the farm when you've seen gay pieere right? I really took to the bay area, I liked being there and when I was finishing my degree, I was also in the process of transitioning. And there was this, you know, I had a snowball's chance in hell of getting an academic job as an out queer trans person in the early ninety's and I just decided that I would use my training not to pursue an academic career but to do more community based work and I just kind of threw myself in trying to learn the local history of trans communities in the San Francisco bay area. And you know, that was a big part of my working life for over a decade. And then, you know San Francisco is still where I make my home, my partner and I have a house there, we're never going to leave that cause San Francisco real estate market is so crazy, we wouldn't be able to get back in. You know, a lot of our family is in that area at this point, you know kids and siblings. Parents' generation is gone now but we've just got deep roots in the bay area. So even though over the last decade or so, it's like I've worked in other places. I've had visiting professorships in Vancouver, Harvard, and I had a permanent ten-year track job in Indiana for a while. I've been in Tucson for eight years now, even though I've worked other places I've always kept one foot on the ground in San Francisco. I had a very unsustainable carbon footprint flying back and forth to both work in my field and maintain my domestic and family life in San Francisco

**Lewis:** May I ask about the farm before you discovered Gay Pieere? You're from Oklahoma, is that right?

**Stryker:** Yeah, more or less. I'm from Oklahoma, my bio family is all from North Eastern Arkansas. You know, all of my kin folk are from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Missouri, you know that kind of Mid-South area. And so that's where the cousin, grandparents, aunt and uncles were for the most part. But my dad had joined the military coming out of high school back in the late 1950's and so I actually grew up all over the place. I spent about half of my growing up years in Oklahoma because we were stationed at Fort Sill. It's the field artillery training center, my dad taught there. I also lived in Germany, I lived in Hawaii and sometimes when he was overseas, like he was a Vietnam combat veteran. When he was in Vietnam and when he was in Korea, we lived with family

More than anything else I'm from Oklahoma because that's where I spent bulk of my growing up years, but I also feel like I was not deeply rooted there.

**Lewis:** You said, he was in the army?

**Stryker:** Yeah, field artillery.

**Lewis:** What was it like moving around?

**Stryker:** Well you know, it was just my normal, I didn't know life could be otherwise. I think I moved seven times before I was ten years old. And you know, it's just what life was like. Then when I was ten, we kind of stayed put in Oklahoma for a while. My dad died relatively young, he was in his mid-thirties and he died when I was 13. We just stayed in Oklahoma, which is where we were living when he died. By the time I was in high school, you know I definitely had the sense of you know "hmm, I'm here and I don't mind being from here, there are things I like about here" but I never thought of it as the whole world or where I wanted to be. I'd seen an ocean before, you know, and I just always thought I would leave. I did wind up going to the University of Oklahoma as an undergrad because I got really good fellowship opportunities to stay in state.

**Lewis:** [inaudible]

**Stryker:** Graduated high school in 1979 and graduated from college in '83, then went straight into a PhD program in Berkley, which is where I really wanted to go you know. I had remembered, the way I had thought about when I was a teenager was, I want to live someplace that other people go to on vacation, but I didn't quite know where that would be. Maybe here's an origin story for you, I was on the debate team in high school and I was reading the weekly news magazines every week to stay up on current events and I remembered reading about the assassination of Harvey Milk and I just thought "Oh! San Francisco, if they could elect an out gay man to the board of supervisors that must mean there is a lot of gay people in San Francisco and if there's a lot of gay people in San Francisco, maybe there's a lot of people who are trans like me." And I thought "and it's beautiful and then, uh! It's like Berkeley you know, I was thinking of Berkley in the 60's, I thought of Berkley as a radical place that had a great university and by the time I was in my late teens I was like maybe I will move to the bay area." That seed was planted pretty early for me.

**Lewis:** I had a somewhat similar thought process growing up in New York city..(inaudible)  
Did you grow up with siblings?

**Stryker:** Yeah, I have a brother.

**Lewis:** And who raised you all after your father passed away?

**Stryker:** My mother. You know, I grew up until 13 in a very conventional home: man, woman, couple, married, family with two kids. When my dad died when I was 13, you know my mom just had a high school education, she had never gone to college. She had worked pretty low level secretarial, administrative assistant kind of jobs. She had also worked at a newspaper as a proofreader, very good typist, very good proofreader. And she decided I guess when I was 15, she had worked a couple of years after my dad died, it was pretty sudden and traumatic in the family. When she started bouncing back from that, she decided “alright I’m going to get a college education,” she quit her job. We lived on veterans’ benefits, survivors’ benefits, social security benefits and mom just went to school full time and became a social worker. She actually for a while worked in community mental health, but most of her career was working for the department of defense. She was a social worker who did substance abuse and drug testing for the army. She ran the big program of drug testing and drug counseling at Fort Sill. That was the bulk of her career. So, I grew up on the government toll for the most part.

**Lewis:** I take it that you had awareness of trans as a thing when you were living in Oklahoma?

**Stryker:** I did have awareness of trans as a thing. I am one of those people who from earliest memories felt gender different. I’m agnostic about how that comes about, I can tell stories of etiology or tell autobiographical stories about why I think I’m trans because you know most of us aren’t and those of us who are why. It’s an interesting question but not that I think we have to have a good answer in order to be able to be validated as a trans person in the present. Just curiosity like “why am I as I am?” But as a small child, I just distinctly remember understanding that I was being positioned by others as boy, but that my own trajectory was towards girl, that was my orientation. We don’t really talk much about gender orientation, which is my assumption, my gender target. Just like, the future is female. And that was completely unquestioned in me early on. Then by the time I was 5 I think, that’s sort of where the crisis happened. Where I, that’s when I realized that bodies were different, and that bodily difference is what tracked you into these different social genders. And I was like “uh oh,” what is to be done? I definitely, from around age 5 had my eyes and ears open to looking for information that would kind of help solve this personal extensional conundrum about the difference I felt between my own internal self of gender identity and what the world was putting on me.

**Lewis:** Did you find information?

**Stryker:** Because we live in a masc culture society, it’s a lot of the earlier stuff that catch these glimmers of would be in mass media. I remember a very fond attachment of Bugs Bunny the Warner brothers cartoons because Bugs Bunny often wore girls’ clothes and was completely unapologetic about it. It wasn’t this schtick, guy in a dress, yuck kind of humor. It wasn’t humiliating, it was just, there was something very empowered about Bugs Bunny’s gender transgression and I really liked that. Well, I can say that I was 10, 11, or 12, somewhere in there, I remember it was after we moved back to Oklahoma and before my father died, so somewhere around like 71, 71 in there. I was reading the newspaper, was a precocious little kid I read the newspaper every day, and in the Dear Abby advice column, there was this letter that was along the lines of “Dear Abby, I have discovered that my husband is wearing my clothes, is he a

homosexual?” and “Dear Concerned Wife, a homosexual is someone who loves a member of their own sex, your husband is either a transvestite or a transsexual. A transvestite is someone who enjoys wearing the clothing of the opposite sex and a transsexual is someone who thinks they are member of the opposite sex. I suggest counseling for your marriage.” And I was like “transsexual, it’s a word! There’s a thing, there’s other people.” I went to the library to start looking up “transsexual” in the card catalog. That old thing that doesn’t exist anymore, analog google. I was a little disappointed because the only information I could find at the Carnegie public library in Comanche County Oklahoma, only information on transsexuality was in textbooks of abnormal psychology. You know, I was a kid, I couldn’t really understand a lot of it, but I found these college level textbooks and was trying to read about transsexuals and my takeaway point from all of that was transsexuals are crazy. I was very disappointed because I thought “oh I thought I might be transsexual, but those people are mentally ill. I’m fine, I just have this feeling of myself being differently gendered, so I guess I’m this other kind of thing that I don’t even have a word for yet.” So, there was this attraction to but disidentification with the idea of transsexuality. It took me another few years, it took me until the summer I turned 18 to basically go “you know, maybe I’m a certain kind of transsexual whose not a crazy person and that I can do something that finds a way to work with this category or term.” Yeah, there was information, little dribbles of information about trans-ness that I was able to find. I remember seeing an ad in the same newspaper for a screening of the film *I Want What I Want*. I don’t know if you know this film, it was based on a novel by Jeffrey Brown, I think was the author’s name. It was a British novel I’ve since read it, it was made into a trashy tabloid b movie “I Want What I Want..to be a woman.” And you see there was this illustration of a man standing naked from the waist up in front of a full-length mirror and he’s looking into the mirror, the reflection back is a woman naked from the waist up, I guess she was wearing a bra. Just that mirror scene of like “yes, that is the answer” that is the fantasy in some sense, just like you want to see a reflection back of how you think of yourself. I guess I was 11 or 12 at this time, I guess they had the movie picture ratings out by that time, like the R ratings and X ratings, I can’t remember when that system got started but anyways it was an adult’s film and I rode my bike downtown and snuck into the film and watched it. I was very disappointed because I thought, “oh, this is actually just kind of boring,” I thought it was going to be a revelation but this is actually just a pretty crappy movie where this person suffering and whining and moaning and then like okay at the end they get what they want and they see themselves in the mirror. Not much of a payoff for me sitting here this long. By the time I was in high school Renee Richards was all over the place.

**Lewis:** So, like late 70’s by then?

**Stryker:** Yeah late 76, 77, somewhere in there. And so, you know I paid a lot of attention to the Renee Richard’s story and it was in newspaper coverage about Renee Richards that is like “Most Famous Transsexual Since Christine Jorgensen in the 1950’s.” So, by the later 70’s I was going “ah this trans thing has got a history, it could be recovered, I could learn about this.” Anyways, by the time I was in high school I definitely had a sense that trans was a thing. Started college in ‘79, and it was in 1979 that I read, I guess there were a few things. I thought “oh yay, now that I’m at university there will be a great library and I can go find out about all kinds of cool stuff about this

thing that I think I could maybe be.” There were two books on transsexualism in the University of Oklahoma library in 1979. One of them was Janice Raymond *The Transsexual Empire* which it was pretty new at that time, I think it was like ‘78, ‘79. So, somebody was right there on it and got that book. The other one was Robert Stoller’s book, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred*. Anyway, in that one it’s just very pathologizing of trans people. I was disappointed when I read that book because every time Stoller was describing something or excerpting something from somebody’s case history where they were talking about their feelings of being trans, someone had gone through the book and razored out all of those autobiographical statements so that book was just like swiss cheese. Was it somebody who was fetishizing trans or somebody who was censoring trans, I don’t know? Yeah that was my first university library encounter with trying to find more information about being trans. Then in my history class I was taking, we read Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and through that I learned about Simone de Beauvoir and that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. By the time I’m about 18, I’m thinking things like “oh people fetishize or sensor trans people. Some feminist think trans people are the worst things in the world, but other feminists think of gender as a process that you engage in over the course of your life, that you become something, and we are all in the process of becoming.” You know, like the old Bob Seger song says, “I was working on mysteries without any clues.”

**Lewis:** That’s a pretty nuanced take for an 18-year working with very limited source material.

**Stryker:** It was out of that hunger, like you’re looking for something and these were the things that were put in front of me on my path.

**Lewis:** Were you aware of the gay and trans activism going on nationally at that time?

**Stryker:** No, not really. I mean I did, certainly not any trans activism. Because I was active in student government in college, it’s like I knew people who were involved in the Gay Activist Alliance, I mean forget exactly what they called it, but I knew some political gays through student government. Their big focus of their activism was national coming out day. That was basically it, people would on nationally coming out day people say, “I’m gay” and before the AIDS crisis. I wouldn’t say Norman, Oklahoma was a normally politized campus environment. They would also do this thing called national blue jeans day. Were they would do this thing, “if you support gay rights wear blue jeans today” but it was just kind of a joke? Then you’d watch all the frat boys wearing their three-piece suits that day, like “we’re not gay.” Yeah that was my first exposure to gay activism.

**Lewis:** What’s your inner life around gender, were you like sharing with other people in your life at the time?

**Stryker:** I was not sharing with other people in my life at the time. Although, kind of like, I feel like I don’t want to say coming out to myself but that my sense of transness was very inward as a child and teenager. I sort of struggled with trying to find terminology for myself or like thinking “well I know there’s got to be other people like me somehow, there’s Renee Richards, there’s this Christine Jorgensen person that’s mentioned in the press, but like what am I going to do

about this. Am I going to, to use today's language, transition? Am I going to change my sex? I don't know yet." This is kind of like a life's course issue, I had dated. I have always been attracted to women; I was always attracted to women from a stud point of feminine identification. It was always a lesbian attraction for me, and you know, it's complicated to date when you're attracted to someone in one way and they are attracted to you in another. You're not out to them and I would get frustrated in my relationships, because it was not, I didn't feel scene in them, and I didn't know how to be out in them. In the summer of 1980, I scraped together every penny I could find and went backpacking in Europe that summer. It was the first time in my life that I was completely alone, alone in the sense that I wasn't around family. I was completely out of my context. It was really the first time I think I had the space to just think well who am I to myself instead of who am I to other people. It was a really significant coming of age kind of trip for me to be able to do that. I have this very romantic memory of how I had gone to the lake to strip because I wanted to hike up in the Fells in England. Because I want to walk the paths of Long fellows[?] Have walked and wanted to think about romantic poetry. It was up there in the Lake District, walking along the fells that, I don't know there was this moment where it was all gray and foggy, the fog lifted and the sun broke through and there was something in me that was going "you know, I don't know what a creature like me is but I know that if I want to find happiness with other people I have to be open with them about who I am and maybe I'll transition or maybe I won't. I just don't know but I need to find somebody to be with me in this process. I just have to be open to the future, holding the possibility of me transitioning and what should I do in the meantime. I need to be out to whomever I'm dating about my sense of gender difference." The way I thought of it at the time "I should probably find bisexual women to date, because I want somebody who knows how to feel erotically attracted to women but is not put off by male anatomy. You know, I'm just going to hold myself open to that." I came back from that trip and started my sophomore year in college and I met this woman in my fencing class, who wanted to fence with me, practice with me because I'm left handed and it's more common for people to be right handed so left handers have an advantage in fencing because most people are not, you're making your attack from a different side basically and she just wanted to practice with me as a left handed person. I got to know her, fencing with her, and I thought "I kind of think she's a dyke but I kind of think she's into me" and we wound up dating, I should have known, we were both into film. She was a grad student; she was older than me. I was a sophomore and she was a second year in a MA program in German and I spoke German because we lived in Germany when I was a kid and I was taking German for my foreign language in college. We had the German thing in common, but we were also very interested in film. Our first date was to go see a triple feature in October of 1980, [inaudible] 34:03 German expressionist films for Halloween and we were talking about film and horror and shellac and science fiction and I said "have you ever seen Rocky Horror picture show?" and she said "no I haven't" and I said "oh well we should go" and so the next weekend we went to see the Rocky Horror Picture show together and she just kept telling me she thought Frank-N-Furter was so damn hot and I thought "this is getting more and more interesting." Then we wound up being together for 11 years and I was out to her really early in the relationship. The relationship had a BDSM fantasy and role-playing dimension to it. She came out to me about having bondage fantasies and what not and I came out to her about being trans identified and there was this moment where she said, "my deepest fear about being tied up or spanked by somebody, asking for that from a man." I was like "We're golden," that's

not where I would be tying you up and spanking you from. And so, we were just out to each other, very, very early. I thought for a long time that was enough, I found somebody who gets me and I didn't necessarily feel like I needed to deal with the whole social stigma of being visibility and publicly trans because I felt recognize in my primary relationship but as time went on, you know it took me, (inaudible) what is like similar to that absorbed, it wasn't enough. Now it's not just who I am to my partner, who am I to in the world? And then we started having tensions in the relationship. The way I've always understood it, she had come from this very homophobic, dysfunctional family where she didn't feel out about, didn't feel good being out, about being queer. And that she found something in me that felt queer to her and yet played straight to the world, I was her closet. She was just deathly afraid of giving that up. We had a child together, was born in 1983, I was starting graduate school and the stakes were pretty high for keeping the relationship together. I tried for a long time to find a way to work within the constraints of the relationship, like it was okay as long as it was private but not okay to be public, in my terms expressing a sense of being trans. It happened over the years, was I really kind of lived a double life, by day star graduate in high powered high profiled graduate program and my partner was in a PhD program in English. We were the model feminist family, splitting all of our responsibilities right down the middle: childcare and cooking and everything, we were like the poster children for "how does heterosexuality work." Then on the other hand, I was spending a lot of time in the dungeon and drag bars of San Francisco, there was like a geographical cure in a sense. Like in the east bay of Berkley it's publicly, who I was before I transitioned but meanwhile, starting to nose my way around the sexual underground *demi monde* of San Francisco in the later 80's.

**Lewis:** What were the dungeon and drag bars of San Francisco like?

**Stryker:** Fun! It was, I felt like I didn't really have a good place to fit in. Looked male body in the world, was not gay. Was leery a lot of lesbian and feminist spaces because of Janice Raymond. Was not particularly enamored of the trans spaces that I could find, which were very, hats off to those people. They were surviving.

**Lewis:** What kind of trans spaces were they?

**Stryker:** Very sad support groups kind of spaces, everyone seemed really depressed. Their lives seemed very constrained, I thought "can I give up everything else in my life to express myself the way I want?" That could cost me everything, I don't know. I knew of street working, sex street work cultures but again, felt like well I could do that if I have to, but I wanted more. There just wasn't any real good place to plug in. I did find a leather community, in retrospect some of it was very particular to San Francisco, there had been a long history of bigendered leather community play spaces, people like Cynthia Slater who started networking with gay male leather clubs and there was a lesbian feminist SM, there was Patrick Califia and Gayle Rubin, there was a politically conscious counter cultural gender diverse leather community in San Francisco that I had found my way into but the later 1980's.

**Lewis:** Did you know them back then, like Patrick Califia and Gayle Rubin?

**Stryker:** I did, yeah. Pat and I never really got along but Gayle became a good friend. I think I met Gayle in '89, might have been '88, something that could be looked up. There was somebody running against Jesse Helms, Harvey Gant I think was his name. Gayle had organized a fundraiser at the Eagle in San Francisco, it was called "the beat Jesse Helm flog-a-thon" and I went "well I got to go there." I was there, it was mostly to give some money to this political campaign. I thought the DJ was really interesting, playing this really interesting sort of industrial music and I thought "he's kind of a butch bottom looking person" and I thought "hmm, I'll go chat this person up." We were talking and it was Gayle.

**Lewis:** Gayle was the DJ?

**Stryker:** Yeah, Gayle DJs. It was like "you're Gayle Rubin?!" You know we hit it off, it was actually through Gayle, I was saying I wanted to get more involved in doing community-based history of leather community and trans history. Which she was like 'do you know about the gay and lesbian historical society?' and I said "oh yeah I do actually cause I have a friend from grad school whose one of the founders of it but you're right I should try plug in there." From the late 80's on, Gayle was just like a partner in crime for me. Not like we were best buds and hung out all the time, but we were in a reading group together, as two perverts without portfolio in the San Francisco bay area. Were interested in history and culture and politics, it was just like we crossed paths multiple times and she was quite influential for me, for helping me kind of bridge the gaps between sort of a subcultural scene and an intellectual life.

**Lewis:** May I ask, what were some of the bars and dungeons for you frequented at the time?

**Stryker:** Well, the main, I tried to plug in the outcasts at first. Which is a lesbian SM group and their rule was we don't have any rules about who's a woman, but you have to, other than like, you need to live socially as a woman. When I was first getting connected, I wasn't doing that yet. It wasn't a hostile rejection, I knew people there, they would do public programs sometimes that were open to anyone and I would go to those. Through my connections and the outcasts, I got plugged into this other group of, I think of it as a podo queer scene. I meant it's before the word queer really started taking off around 1990, '91. We were called the link's party, l-i-n-k-s, it was a pan gender, really free formed, I think it was like experimental jazz BDSM, it was really fun. That was quite formative for me, I've actually written some about this. There's this article that I wrote, published in Parallax called Dungeon Intimacies. I describe some of what that scene meant to me at the time. It was a really important space for me to have a social environment where I felt like I could take myself apart and put myself together again, kind of develop a sociality around my transness and not have it just be largely in my head. To be in a room with a lot of other smart perverts was really fun and formative, quite formative for me. I've written about that sense of like, it's where I feel like I first really had an embodied sense of myself, that I wanted to extend not just like out of my head or out of primary relationship or out of a subcultural scene but kind of the end of the world. It was just a queer pervy leather kink was great grounding for everything else I ever did.

**Lewis:** Did you have a sense of class and race in those two [inaudible] (47:40)

**Stryker:** It was largely white. Class was like all over the map, from poor people virtually homeless and living on the streets and to people who were quite wealthy, it was very pan class. White majority, some Asian, some Latinx, some African American but I don't think I knew any indigenous people in that scene. Most everybody I knew was really politically left and counter cultural, critical and engaged. It was a very, people were just very thoughtful and engaged in that scene.

**Lewis:** What kind of political issues were you and others in the scene sort of engaged around?

**Stryker:** We can get to that in a minute, you said what kind of bars did you hang out in, I'm trying to remember other places. There was, it was long enough ago that I'm not remembering exactly when some of these things were. I used to go to a place called the mother lode. I know, early 90's I'm not sure, late 80's. There was a place called the black rose, that was mostly a sex work bar, lot of trans women worked out of the black rose.

**Lewis:** Where were those two bars?

**Stryker:** Tenderloin. Diving mission bars, El Rio. Amelia's more of a lesbian bar that didn't have a strict separatist door policy. Not too much time in the cats for me, mission and tenderloin were kind of my scenes. Through the leather scene there was another organization called the Society of Janice, which was more like het and swinger oriented. They would organize these parties where you would go and check out all of these different dungeon spaces and so I've been in a lot of dungeon spaces that were more like the gay male scene. Like the 15 association, there was just dungeons spread all over San Francisco and I would sort of go through them. I worked for a while right at the end of graduate school and before I became really unemployed. I worked for a while as a pro-dom, partly because I wanted to see if I transition and lose everything, how do I feel about doing sex work, I feel fine about doing sex work. There was this great dungeon on Valencia street at 18th, 17th, I'm going to forget. Part of the Valencia that Michele T. wrote about Valencia and what Valencia street has become in recent years. Yeah, I worked out of that dungeon with somebody I had known socially through the leather scene, who was old school, well regarded kind of legendary madam of the house. Some time spent in the Lower Haight, which is more, was not a particularly queer scene but was counter cultural in a way that was okay to be visibly trans. I knew people who worked as strippers and pole dancers, sometimes in sex clubs in north beach. I just felt like I got a pretty good introduction to down low San Francisco in the later 80's early 90's. Politics, sort of in my life in Berkley I was connected to anti-apartheid politics, so there was a big move at that time to divest UC's portfolio South African interests and we were pretty active in that, a lot of street protests and occupations of buildings. My partner at the time was very concerned that I not get arrested and so I didn't do things that I thought would directly result in my arrest, but I did a lot of work with support for people who had been jailed. Going to Santa Rita jailed, picked people up who had been bailed out. I was involved in labor union politics; I was a shop steward for the history department for the association for graduate student employees UAW district 65 and did work to get union representation for graduate student employees. Actually later my filmmaking partner Victor Silverman, he was an old friend

of mine from grad school and we did anti-apartheid politics together and he was the other shop steward for GSE, so he and I co-led a wildcat strike in the history department against the university because they were going to reclassify all the grad students at a lower ranking where you wouldn't get paid as much and we didn't think that was fair because you would have people who had been grandfathered in to the top of the pay scale who under this new regime that they were trying to put in place, would get bumped down to the second of four job classifications, who said like "No, no, if you're already at the top level, you got to be grandfathered in at the top level of the new pay scale" and University was saying "nope". We organized the history department to do a grade with holding strike like we're just not going to turn in our grades, and you can't close out your books of the semester until our demands are met. It was fun to take on institutionalized power and figure out a way to actually make a change to get something that you thought was right. We had one of the departmental secretaries in the history department was very active in, like she was on the AFL-CIO council for Alameda county, maybe chapter president of the AFSCME union. She was just feeding us all kinds of information from the organized labor movement, talked to us about strategies and tactics and what we could reasonably expect, where are pressure points were. That was a fun learning curve for me.

**Lewis:** What was the outcome?

**Stryker:** We won.

**Lewis:** This was in what year?

**Stryker:** Later eighties sometime. By the earlier nineties, I was, I was going to say the other thing going on at Berkley, support work around the wars in central America, there was a lot of campus activism too. To do solidarity work with people in El Salvador and Guatemala, all of the dirty wars that the US was supporting there but I wouldn't say, it was very low-level involvement with some of those groups. I had some friends who were Trotskyites, they were always trying to get me to participate in their actions and I was like "yeah I don't think," definitely a fellow traveler but I don't want to get involved in sectarian Marxist politics, like let's hang out and drink beer together. One of the places where my straight life and queer life came together was in activism against the war in Iraq. Different strands of my life were starting to cross over in some of the antiwar protests because queer nation was a huge presence in war activism back then. That was one of the places where my worlds collided, and it was around that time that I was deciding to come out more publicly as trans. Some of that had to do with the shifting cultural landscape. In the 80's I didn't feel like there was any place for me to be where I was legible except very underground leather community. By the early 90's with queer hitting in a different way, with queer theory in the academy and queer nation, the militancy of act up, the antiwar protests that were going on, it just really felt like things were ripping apart in this very interesting way that created more space, more cultural space. As that space was opening up I was moving into it and finding a way to start bridging my subcultural politics with my more out in the open straight world politics and a way of seeing how I could be queer in the streets and queer in the sheets and queer in the ivory tower too. I thought that there was an intellectual project, the more homo oriented queer theory of that day. I definitely saw as opening a door where this can be for trans too. As soon as I came out

publicly as trans I started getting involved in LGBTQ activism at the Berkley campus. I was part of this group that set up the queer studies minor, the LGBTQ student services center and doing activism and advocacy for queer employees of the university. That was like '92, so my coming out, I'll talk more about the queer activism at the university later but when I decided "nope" publicly transitioned and wanted to be a whole interrogated person, same me in all places at all times. I had a part time job working at Stormy Leather, which is a fetish clothing store in south of market. It was a really slow day. I was just trying things on and I looked at myself in the mirror wearing this black leather studded mini dress and I saw myself in the mirror and I thought "I look like a guy in a dress. I just can't stand this anymore; I need to physically transition." Something just snapped and I went home and said to the person I was involved with at the time "I know that you said it would be the end of our relationship and you would fight me for custody of our child" but I said "I can't do it anymore, I just cannot do this anymore. I'm going to transition, it's like if you're going to leave me, you're going to leave and if you're going to fight me for custody I'm going to I will fight you but I am doing this, I'm doing it now." And you know there we went, that relationship broke up turns out she didn't fight me for custody which was a huge relief. I started very deliberately plotting my transition, I started hormones and I was coming out to more friends but I was being very cautious about the university because I thought "I am not going to have worked this hard to get here to just sort of flame out around you know coming out."

**Lewis:** How did you access hormones at that time?

**Stryker:** Through my community contacts, found a therapist and you know had to go do the, show them that I was trans enough for three months, get a prescription, find an endocrinologist. I didn't go the street drug routes you know, went through the medical establishment, we can talk more about that if you want.

**Lewis:** You were being calculated on how to handle the --

**Stryker:** Being very calculated about how to handle the transition because my dissertation advisor was kind of an asshole more than kind of an asshole, he was like really abusive. I just did not trust him you know, I just thought that he would fuck with me somehow and so after having kind of stalled out for a while on finishing my dissertation, partly because I didn't want to finished because I didn't want to take next steps in life, it was like I was trying to figure out my gender stuff and I didn't want to leave the bay area. So, after having written two chapters in three years, it's like I finished the bulk of my dissertation in about six months just squirted it out, part of it are not pretty, I've never published it.

**Lewis:** How did you end up writing a dissertation on Mormonism?

**Stryker:** We can talk about that too but anyway I finished the dissertation, I submitted it, it was filed, I hadn't walked yet you know in the graduation but it's like I completed all requirements for degree and as soon as my dissertation was filed and accepted, the very next day I went and filed a petition to change the name on the title page cause it doesn't matter what name it is right. It's just a bureaucratic thing of changing the name on the title page and two of my committee

members were very supportive and I got their signatures first then just kind of, very quickly rushed up to my advisor said “hey Charlie I need you to sign this quickly need a new title page,” and he was like “what” but it was done. I just wanted to make sure I had those three initials, the P, H, and D because I thought I need all the cultural capital, intellectual capital I can muster as I head into this new stage of life. You asked how I came to write on the Mormons, some of it has autobiographical roots, my mother’s family was not the Utah version of Mormons, they were part of a smaller Mormon offshoot.

**Lewis:** Were they LDS?

**Stryker:** Well they were RLDS which you might know something about in Iowa, I don’t know cause they were pretty centered in the Midwest but the long back story is that when Joseph Smith the founder of Mormonism was assassinated in 1844 he didn’t have a succession plan put in place, you know nobody was expecting him to be murdered. So there was this sort of institutional crisis where the people who were in the Mormon movement were trying to figure out what they were going to do and about two thirds of the early Mormons,, the majority the clear accepted the leadership of Brigham Young and he sort of led them from Illinois to Utah. It was in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1844 that Smith was murdered. The thing that most people think of as the Mormons, takes off from that point but about a third of the original Mormon movements rejected Brigham Young’s leadership but it was pretty complicated because it was part of the crisis at which Smith was murdered was when a lot of the Rankin file Mormons, first learned polygamy was going on among the higher ups in the church hierarchy, some people thought Smith had taken the church in the wrong direction. So, you had all sorts of these schisms going on and so there was like I said two thirds of the church goes to Utah and a third of the church gets kind of broken up into a dozen different little small sectarian factions. And then in the 1870’s, this is like thirty years later there was a movement among those scattered little Mormon offshoots to come together in a new church organization called the reorganized church of Jesus Christ latter day saints and it’s weird cause they’re like the anti-Mormon Mormons. They’re against those people who commandeered the movement and went out to Utah, they were anti polygamy. Anyways I thought of them as the Quaker Mormons, or the Trotskyist Mormons, you know they were the Mormons, that were for the revolution but did capture the state apparatus. So anyways it’s weird to grow up where you’ve got half of your family belongs to this movement that is completely consumed with these little internecine squabbles about who are the real Mormons, and it was something I knew about when I was a kid, was exposed to, a lot of relatives who were involved in it but because we were in the military we weren’t always around them. And so I had this experience all of my growing up years of like stepping into and out of different religious cosmologies and ontologies, it’s like there can be more than one reality at a time which then informed my sense of transness, kind of like always thinking “well kind of like me feeling feminine identified but being seen as a man.” There’s a difference between my internal reality and external reality and so you know those things, my sense of being trans and having this background where it’s like some people think of farm boy in upstate New York found these like magical gold plates that he translated with god’s help and other people think that’s crazy. I have this deep internal sense of being feminine identified, but the world tells me I’m crazy, so they seem to analogous somehow to me and I think kind of help inculcate in me this sense of realities

can be plural. So then when I was in grad school I really thought what I was going to write my dissertation on was what I thought of as, I don't want to use the word indigenous but like sort of, I wanted to sort of look at homegrown radical movements in North America and my sense there was not necessarily Marxist ideas of revolution where it's like you're sort of waiting for the revolutionary moment or the conditions are not right yet for whatever but more of a sense like how can we radically change the way we live now. Kind of like when you might call prefigurative politics sort of a DIY revolutionaries who are not waiting for the future to come but are like living now the way that they want to live. I was sort of casting around for a topic that could let me ask those questions and I had some family based knowledge of one of the Mormon offshoots in Texas that was like radically communitarian, they called themselves bible communists and I just thought "you know I could draw on this sectarian Mormon history to like maybe take like, they definitely had this sense of like we're living now they way that we think we should live," like they were overthrowing the bourgeoisie marriage to institute biblically sanctioned polygamy and the days of the saints they had all things common so you have to abolish private property and it was this weird sort of mix of things but it's like oh they're sort of doing that thing that I'm interested in "do it now do it yourself" mentality for sociopolitical transformation. So, I wrote a seminar paper on the white height faction of Mormons, in Zodiac, Texas. The guy that I wrote it for was a big antebellum US historian thought it was great and is like you can make this your dissertation topic and I thought "oh you know I could." I was thinking of it from more a left perspective but you know it would be kind of fascinating to look at we might now a call populist ethno-nationalist theocratic movement that is trying to actualize it's sense of the proper way to live, like "uh yeah that would kind of out of the box for me and yeah I've got this angle on it from my family history," it's like yeah I think I'm going to do that. As the project developed the way that I'm trying to frame it now is to say it became a dissertation that was much more about the emergence of historically novel identify formations. You know 1825 there's no such thing as a Mormon just doesn't exist, the word is not even there, 1845 well there's people who say they are one, they make these identify statements about being one, there is a social movement, there is body of literature, there is a cosmology, there is innovation in the kinship system, there's a transcontinental migration. Over the course of twenty years, boom this whole new socio-political cultural formation emerges that has significance for the whole process of supplement of North America. It became a huge part of the settler colonial history of North America; how did that happen. How is it that the emergence of historically novel forms of identity becomes something that is so culturally productive?

**Lewis:** that's an interesting throwaway.

**Stryker:** That was my oblique entry into doing trans history. I never - because I was coming out as trans there is no way in hell I was going to get a job teaching early nineteenth century US religious history and I thought but I have this sort of theoretical apparatus for thinking about the cultural and political work that identity formation does and yeah I'm just going to look at sexuality and gender identities. There was a time when the word transsexual did not yet exist, where did that come from and what did it do and how did it happen. So, I feel like I developed my model for thinking about identity by working on the Mormons, you know my dissertation was called Making Mormonism: a case in the formation of marginalized cultural identity. And so, I just

[inaudible] took the Mormons, out and put trans in that model and turned the crank and that's been my career.

**Lewis:** So, what happened after you defended the dissertation?

**Stryker:** Well it was Berkley, so we didn't have to defend the dissertation, we just had to get the title page signed by the director. I did what I then called my seven-year unpaid residency in transgender studies. I was poor as fuck for a long time, I mean I could not find work. I think I was making \$8,000, \$10,000 a year.

**Lewis:** Did you apply for academic jobs?

**Stryker:** I applied for academic jobs every year between 1992 and 2008. It was my annual exercise in futility.

**Lewis:** That sounds horrible.

**Stryker:** Yeah, it's like who am I going to be for the market this year. I just, I couldn't get arrested in academia, but you know I just decided alright well I'm probably not going to have an academic career. If I do have an academic career it will be sometime in the future and it will be because I'm doing the work now to like help build a field. I would joke about it and say like I can't get a job until I build the field I can get hired into.

**Lewis:** [inaudible]

**Stryker:** I mean yes but not by myself. I don't ever want to say I built a field, but I had been doing field development work for 25 years or more at this point. I thought "well I have to live in the meantime I need to do this I'm interested in," need to find a way to keep a roof over my head and my kid's head and you know got to eat. You know, got to save my pennies for surgery and you know all that. In a sense those years between 1992 when I graduated, well between 1992 and 1998, you know the best of times the worst of times. You know poor as fuck but feeling really alive and really energized and you know it just felt like there was so much world building going on. San Francisco was a great place to be in the early nineties, it was just the whole trans scene blew up, it was a new thing under the sun, it was just really infused by this sort of queer sensibility, it was very political it felt very experimental. It wasn't like you know, it was against the whole pathologization, you were seeing things like the Tom Waddell clinic would have it's, called Tranny Tuesdays Clinic that you know you had all these queer and trans medical providers who were doing more harm reduction model, it's like "we're not here to gate keep, if you're taking these drugs it's going to make your life better," like great were for you. There were some of the old divisions between gay and lesbian and trans had broken down through this new queer sensibility. There was the AIDS crisis really helped break down some of the identarian barriers because there were people involved in AIDS politics and AIDS service provisions and a lot cross fertilization and the different mobilization against the war that was going on back then. It just felt very open, really free in a way that I haven't experienced since, it just felt like a lot of world

making going on. You know I was picking up a little adjunct teaching now and then, I taught a few semesters at University of San Francisco, I was volunteering at what's now called the GLBT historical society sort of learning how to be an archivist, I got some contract working doing an AIDS history project where I was going out and collecting papers of people who had been involved in the first wave of AIDS activism in California and depositing them in the archive. I was doing spoken word performance and figuring out I could be an artistic and creative person besides a wonky historian, I was still involved in the leather community. I was living with a group of people in Oakland who a lot of them came from an anarchist background, I just felt like I was totally in the mix and was trying to articulate this new transgender sensibility. Personal influences for me and how I was thinking about what trans could be, Kate Bornstein was around at the time, she had her play *Hidden: A Gender*, which was very fresh take on being trans, she was very about being a trans lesbian, it wasn't stealth. Justin Vivian Bond had their first stage role in that play, I remember seeing Justin back in the day in that-, Sandy Stone had written *Post-Transsexual Manifesto* which you know I had stumbled across, it must have been about '92 you know when I phoned her up and gotten to know her was very inspired by how she was thinking about post transsexuality. I remember coming across Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* at modern times bookstore in the mission which is sort of the leftist bookstore in San Francisco.

**Lewis:** Is that how those kinds of material were circulating, was like through bookstores?

**Stryker:** Yeah, yeah. You know I was involved in *Transgender Nation*, which was an offshoot of queer nation, I mean it started as a focus group within queer nation then outlived queer nation and became its own thing. Anyway, there was just a shit ton of stuff going on, there was this great party called *Club Confidential*, it was run by Jordy Jones in Stafford. Like a quarterly trans cabaret, um-

**Lewis:** I'm sorry what were they called?

**Stryker:** *Club Confidential*.

**Lewis:** Where was it?

**Stryker:** It was at this old motor inn in a tourist court kind of place and I think it was on Pulp street, I don't know I'm trying to remember the name of the place. It was the ground floor like club and restaurant of this kind of sleazy hotel, but it was this great small performance venue that was so fun. It was red doored, bearded lady coffee house and truck stop cafe, where are the people from *Tribe 8* used to hang out and you know, there was - who else was, Harry Dodge was there and Cyrus Howard, Lynn Breedlove, it was like where this punk dyke scene was grounded but it was just like the best coffee house in San Francisco. I would hang out there a lot, I remember doing spoken word reading and performing there, curating little art shows there. You know I have very fond memories of San Francisco in the early nineties and like I said I was very involved post transition and post PhD with the emerging queer scene at Berkeley. At the time Carolyn Dinshaw who was now at NYU was on the English faculty at Berkeley and she and David Halperin were

founding GLQ, which was like the first queer theory journal and Carolynn was the person who coordinated the Berkley bisexual, lesbian, gay alliance thing which I had plugged into as a place to start doing campus based activism where we got the queer theory minor going and the student services thing and the faculty advocacy work so I feel like I got to see the early institutionalization of queer theory in the academy by being plugged in there and thinking along oh there's like either trans has a place in queer theory because queer is anti-heteronormative but in a way that bigger than homo or it needs to be its own things, right so both and. I felt like I kind of had a ring side seat to the beginning of queer theory institutionalization, have definitely taken a page out of that play book as I've worked to help develop trans studies as a more institutionalized presence within the academy. I will just say parenthetically there's a lot of ambivalence about institutionalizing a field of study and I know it's a really fraud thing to do but for me there's something trans about always insisting on the both and rather than the either or and I think it's both important to access the resources that higher education can bring to trans studies as a well of developing a more politicized depathologizing framework for understanding trans lives and to recognize that the academy is not the be all end all and you know trying to institutionalize things in one way does not say anything about does not say anything negative about the value of all the work that happens extra institutional, extra academic institutional spaces or street politics or cultural production outside the academy. I just see, always saw the process of institutionalization is like bringing more, adding another element you know just another brick in the wall rather than like the thing that was better.

**Lewis:** Were there particular ways that you sort of observed that with the early institutionalization of queer theory that made you sort of convinced of the value of that approach?

**Stryker:** I don't know of any one particular thing other than, well in the late 80's early 90's it still seemed rather impossible to be an out politicized gay or lesbian person who was drawing on embodied knowledge and life experiences as part of your critique of dominant forms knowledge taken seriously. So, I definitely drew inspiration from that, from like seeing, you could form a field of study around those kinds of marginalized knowledges. You know it being the Bay Area, it's like I was well aware of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, the whole Chicana feminism, this bridge called my back moments, you know getting you know had this sense of queer of color feminism as another kind of theory in the flesh and just things like oh will this interest that I have in the historicity of identity formation and the kind of cultural work it can do, seeing that trans could be articulated in a way that it became an analytical lens or rubric or framework of understanding that politics of knowledge production and that you know definitely feel like my sense of trans politics built on queer of color feminism, AIDS activism, politically left movements and the early institutionalization of queer theory. I don't know what more to say, all of that was sort of in the atmosphere for me. I started, I felt very free in not having ten year to worry about, it wasn't like "oh yeah I'm an academic, I'm trying to like write my book, trying to get tenure, got to keep my head down, need to be cautious," it was just like I had fallen off the edge of the universe, I was not on the map, it didn't matter what I did and I just thought "I'm going to do whatever the hell I'm interested in," and so, like I said I was more involved in arts and activism and did my historical research without a view towards having it be a tenurable project and I felt very free to do more

experimental kinds of writing and that's where my words to Victor Frankenstein came from. I wrote that in '93 published in '94. There was some spoken word stuff I was doing back then that I still think holds up pretty well called *The Surgeon Haunts my Dreams* that I did as a performance piece. I started meeting people in more of the arts worlds, like I collaborated with Shu Lea Cheang on the first piece commissioned by the Guggenheim for their digital online library, I think it's called library gallery. This piece called Brandon which was based on the Brandon Tina merger that became sort of exploration of "where is the body in cyberspace and what constitutes violence in this non-compromised space and it was a really interesting early bit of feminist cyber art, feminist and trans cyber art. It was fun to work- I just increasingly got the sense that I can work in a lot of different fields, I can just follow my interest, I can find little ways of getting paid like I said I was poor as fuck. I was intellectually and politically engaged and alive without necessarily knowing that the work that I was doing then would have some kind of longevity where I lay a foundation for me to ultimately have a different kind of job, it was just like I was doing things that I cared about and that mattered to me. In retrospect they were things that kind of aid a foundation for things I could push off on. It's what gave me the confidence to become a filmmaker, it led to the work I was doing with the GLBT historical society at some point I became the executive director of the organization and learned I actually had some management and fundraising skills. You know I would write coffee table books on bay area queer history, it really taught me how to do publishing. You know I would do special issues of journals like oh I know how to edit and basically trying to cobble together a living by doing things like I felt I could take on to do. It gave me a pretty broad portfolio of professional skills that after six or seven years did actually turn into a career, in a different way. I would say a turning point for me was getting the Ford Foundation Social Science Research Council Post-doctoral Fellowship in Sexuality Studies and I give total props to my friend Joanne Meyerowitz for encouraging me to do that. It was a new program in 1997 and Joanne got one of the first cohorts of that grant. I knew her cause we both working on trans historical topic at the time, she was working on her book *How Sex Changed* and she gets this fellowship, she says "you need to apply for this next year" and I'm going "I'm apply to things all the time, that's a bitch of an application, it's just going to take too much time." She's like "no you need to apply for this" and she was actually advocating really strongly for me within the SSRC program to fund the work I was doing. And I applied and I got, and I had a postdoc for two years at Stanford in '98 to 2000. Having that funding for two years, I mean I look back on it now and it's like I think it was \$45,000 a year of this postdoc but it's like I've been living on a quarter, I felt rich. It gave me this institutional access at Stanford, it let me do the research that became the film "Screaming Queens." It let me start moonlighting as the executive director of the historical society, like they couldn't afford to pay an executive director and they needed one, well they were going to go under because they didn't have anyone who was doing the fundraisers and kind of building infrastructure for them. It let me take on that job in unpaid capacity for two years so I could build up enough fundraising and grants so that we could afford to hire an executive director before my funding ran out from the SSRC. It was the thing that gave me a different kind of seal of approval from the powers that be. It was taking everything that I kind of learned sub culturally and on the streets and in movements and be able to translate that into some kind of cultural capital. By the later 90's I was doing this research that became screaming queens, I was running a nonprofit organization getting sort of plugged into the city funding machinery differently and I was able to take the time to do more institution building, field

formation work Steve Whittle and I did the trans study reader volume one, came out in 2005. By 20- where do I want to go with this, it's hard, cause like my career path and interests are very diverse and tangled.

**Lewis:** Got a lot of things going on at once.

**Stryker:** A lot of things going on at once. Well yeah maybe that's the place to stop for a minute and we could take a break. Kind of feeling talked out but by around that next chunk of life so like '98 when I get the funding from SSRC up through 2005 or 6, that was me being a nonprofit executive, budding filmmaker and trying to take next steps in field formation, so I think those seven years definitely you know built up what I done before and were setting the stage for what was going to come after. Cause in like 2007 or 8, that's when I started moving back into the academy, partly because it's like by this time I had documentary film under my belt and we had done the trans stand it just sort of trans history, trans study is a thing now. That's another thing, it was in 2007 Seal Press asked me to write Transgender History which then becomes a classroom staple. Anyways based on the work I was doing '98 to 2007 that's the thing that then laid the foundation for me to go into the academy as a professor starting in 2007.

**Lewis:** Want to take a break?

**Stryker:** Yeah that's a lot of blather.

**Lewis:** Hi this is AJ, I'm just weighing back in to say that we are going to continue this interview with another session at a later date at which point I don't have a lot of questions and we will move further into the present. Susan, you have anything you want to add for now?

**Stryker:** Nope, I'm fine. Talk to you later.