

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

PAISLEY CURRAH

Interviewer: Michelle O'Brien

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Michelle O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Paisley Currah 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 July 27, 2019, and this is being recorded in the Midtown Manhattan offices of the New York Public Library. Hello Paisley.

Paisley Currah: Hi there.

O' Brien: How are you doing today?

Currah: I'm doing fine, thank you.

O' Brien: Uh, how about we start off with you just introducing yourself?

Currah: Uh, well my name is Paisley Currah. I teach at the City University of New York, at Brooklyn College. I teach political science and gender and women's studies, um, and I've been there for twenty five years. I am originally Canadian, I moved down to the States in 1988, and I have American citizenship. I was afraid I would accidentally commit a crime and be accidentally deported so [laughter] I can vote. So, what else. I have a child, a nine year old daughter. I live in Crown Heights.

O' Brien: I didn't know your kid was nine.

Currah: Yeah.

O' Brien: My kid is ten.

Currah: Oh wow, they grow fast don't they?

O' Brien: [laughter]

Currah: It's like what, how'd that happen?

O' Brien: Yeah.

Currah: Yeah.

O' Brien: So, I guess, let's start off with, tell us about your childhood and your growing up.

Currah: Um, I grew up in Southern Ontario, in, um, just kinda farm country. It would be similar to, like, Ohio, without as much manufacturing, just a lot of corn and feedlots for beef cattle and chickens and, yeah I grew up in, I can't even say on Facebook where I grew up because it's too small to be on a map, so I grew, you know, grew up outside of [inaudible] of two hundred people. And it was such a small place that when you went trick or treating, you couldn't stop at

the new people's house 'cause they might poison you. And the new people had been there for seventeen years. So it was that kind of place. It's like everybody knew each other, everybody was related, probably little bit of over inbreeding, you know. So I grew up in the country, you know, it was pretty goofy. I didn't understand about traffic lights or crossing the street till I was like thirteen, so. And then when I, um, when I went away to college, we call it university in Canada, but when I went away to university, I came out as a lesbian in my last year of university. And previous to those three years of, previous to the, my fourth year of university I came out as a lesbian and previous to that I was a homophobic little jerk. I wasn't, like, actively homophobic. I didn't, like, campaign against queer people, but I was just, internalized homophobic kind of little jerk. So it gives me a nice broad perspective when I see homophobic or transphobic students on campus. And then, that was in the '80s and then I came down, I had a girlfriend who, my first girlfriend was gonna go to graduate school, and it was a big university, like a big state school, and no one had really mentored me. You know, I was doing fine in classes but I was like, "What's graduate school?". I didn't know anybody who had gone to graduate school or even what it was. I didn't, it hadn't occurred to me that our professors had done something. And she's like, she was kind of sharp, she was like, "Well, you know, you go, you study, you get your M.A. and your Ph.D.". I was like alright, that sounds good, I'll apply, so she, yeah so she came down to Cornell University to do her Ph.D. so I applied the following year, and that's how I landed at Cornell. Of course, as soon as we got there we broke up. So that's how I ended up in higher education, because I just was following a girlfriend and I had no idea what grad school was like or that it was even a thing. I just didn't, didn't have that kind of social capital to know about that. But, I mean, somehow I got in and so I spent six years upstate in Ithaca, and I think that's when I first, um, I got involved in kind of activism and organizing. I think some of the first organizing parts were, there was some kind of, there was some group in New York State that predated the Empire State Pride Agenda, but I can't remember what it was called. It was something, New York State, it was some kind of gay rights group, but the name escapes me. So we had a little, very lame chapter, you know, we didn't really ever do much, and then soon ACT UP kind of swept over things, and that's where I really got, really became more, you know, interesting 'cause it was more of a crisis than some, and then even Albany can seem exciting, but the AIDS crisis seemed like, okay this is happening. So that was, so we had an ACT UP chapter, which was all grad students as you can imagine. We all have these perfect politics but the town gown stuff was very defined. But we did, you know, we did stuff around the local jail. At the time, we thought we had got the local jailkeeper, the sheriff to distribute condoms in prisons and then later we probably realized he probably just promised us that and never did it, like we didn't have enough, we didn't have enough experience as activists to kind of do the follow through but we would come down to New York City for those big ACT UP meetings and go to the center, which was just kind of a trashy place back then, this big room with all these stupid columns in it, and we were like, oh these are the real activists. We're like, oh my goodness. And one time Sarah Schulman came to Cornell to speak, and we were all just like, oh my god, that's Sierra Showman, you know now I know her, and it's kind of funny like oh she's just a person, you can actually talk to her, but back then we were like oh my god, and they had these clothes, like they had boots and Doc Martens and we were like, wow that's what you do when you're in New York. It was kind of interesting, like we had, part of it was just kind of being [inaudible] into like, learning what urban queer culture was, 'cause everybody there was

sort of a hick from some other, even when we were grad students, just from some state college somewhere, so the ACT UP stuff was very, oh this is what it really is to be queer. So then eventually we started a Queer Nation chapter too, always just kind of following closely whatever happened in New York City 'cause that was where the real authenticity was, and we wanted to be like the big kids. There was this guy in Ithaca, he was in the English Ph.D. program, named Ned Brinkley, and he had been at the Saint Patrick's Cathedral action, and he was like our god, he would come in the room and organize us, and you know, and we were just like that's real life, that's real activism, 'cause in a college town there's just, you don't really disrupt anything because they're just, everybody's taken care off and nothing bad is gonna happen to the students and it's just a performance. We really looked up to the New York folks, and then of course we moved down here, I just realized they're all just regular people who probably didn't know exactly what they were doing either, but in time. That was my first introduction to activism. It's kind of funny 'cause when I started Brooklyn College, I tried to find the queer students and I did, they had a club, they called uh, I don't remember what they called it, it was like the LGBT Alliance or something, and I went in there and there was these five or six students and they're all smoking and they kind of stared at me as they stared at any new person who walked into their room saying who are you, and I'm like "I'm the new professor, you know, I'm queer and I wanted to meet the students." They kind of blew the smoke in my eyes and said, what kind of activism do you do, and I was like, well you know in Ithaca I did ACT UP and Queer Nation, and they were like, that's so bourgeois. They were like super radical and the kind of radical that I wasn't used to. And I'm still friends with some of them, like Carolyn Riccardi, she was one of them. She, you know—

O' Brien: I saw Carolyn this morning.

Currah: Oh yeah, yeah, she might be tomorrow at, I might see her at the Trans Day of Action tomorrow or [inaudible], like just people, you know, still in touch with. But I was just, even the students were cooler than I was when I got to Brooklyn College. But, yeah, that was the, my history of an activist didn't, that's how I landed in Brooklyn, when in fact at Brooklyn College, you know, when I was on the job market as a political theorist trying to find a job, I was [clears throat], from my dissertation you could see, you could probably guess that I was queer. Which at that time was not a helpful thing. It was just a bad, no one was gonna, you know a lot of people at Cornell would actually get half-decent jobs but I think my dissertation was just too out there. But then at Brooklyn College, one of the people in my department decided, he was like a left union dude, and he was like, we need a lesbian, because the students are upset about something about the blood drive and there's no, there's only one out queer faculty, we need to have another one, so he just hired me. And when I got the job I thought, oh, they must've read my dissertation and they saw that article, and they're like, no, 99% of the people, the jobs, wouldn't even look at me 'cause I was a lesbian, and this place wouldn't even look at my file, they just wanted a lesbian. So I guess it kind of, it sort of, justice it kind of worked out, but that's how I got the job. So I've been there ever since.

O' Brien: So backing up—

Currah: Yeah.

O' Brien: Following up on a few things, uh, tell me about your parents. What kind of work did they do? Were they farmers or what?

Currah: My dad, um, my dad was a, he was a, he owned a farming supply company, so, I don't know what, so it would be the kind of place where farmers would take their grain and dump it and then he would sell them seeds, and, you know, fertilizer and concrete. And we also had a farm, but it was just very, um, it was like a small business, but I didn't, my playground when I was little was like this factory basically. Where they would have all the fertilizer bins with potash and all of this stuff and I would just play in them, which is, now it just seems like that was probably not a good idea [laughter] like it probably wasn't the healthiest thing. But that was like the '70s when they didn't, no one cared about, you know, health or the environment or whatever. And my mother, she just, you know, she had worked at home as they say. She had four kids in the span of eight years so she was, she was a city girl who accidentally married my dad at college, when they met at college, and ended up in this very small town where she didn't fit in very well. And she had four kids, so, um, yeah.

O' Brien: And what were your parents' dynamic like that you saw or that you were around, like did you get many messages for thinking about gender from them?

Currah: I was definitely always kind of a tom boy. Like my first—kindergarten or first grade my mother always made me wear like a dress or a skirt, and she didn't know any better. And she would like get the Sears Roebuck catalog and she'd—this makes me sound ancient but anyways, but she'd like, sow me these dresses and she didn't even know how to sow but that's what you were supposed to do you know. They were just terrible, and then she realized she would just [inaudible] oh all the other kids aren't wearing skirts so she doesn't have to so that, [laughter] so that changed thank God, and then I never had to wear a skirt again unless I really had to. So they were, they weren't bad [inaudible] they were just kind of clueless but as I grew up, you know it was clear that I was kind of queer. My mother was very, um, I remember when I was eighteen she said—she was telling me this story about how, you know, she had this really good friend who had—who they were really close and she actually had died, but, um, at one point she said "You know and I had sex with my friend just to make sure I wasn't a lesbian, which everyone should do." and I was like—

O' Brien: [laughter]

Currah: Mom why are you telling me this? I don't even—why are you, I don't wanna hear this from my mother. So, she was like, that, kind of saying "I think you're a lesbian you should try it out", but I didn't want to hear that [laughter] so—

O' Brien: How old were you? When—

Currah: I was like eighteen, you know, I had, I wasn't interested in boys but I was just was kind of like, not, I was kind of repressing who, I was I mean I—you know so, I was attracted to women, that was certainly true. The first woman I had a real, the first girl I had a crush on was like the most religious, fanatic person in the whole county, that was like my luck. Like literally, like it's a small little county in Southern Ontario literally this kid went to Oral Roberts University, which no one in Canada does. It's—Canada has a free public higher education system, no one goes to the states to pay for like a wackadoo religious private education, but she did, like that, that's my luck in having my first crush [laughter]. But uh, yeah so, so I kind of in terms of my gender I think I kind of like, I fell in this tomboy category and I, I sort of like was attracted to them but I didn't think about it too much until I got into college.

O' Brien: And you mentioned this prolonged period of internalized homophobia, and what was that like?

Currah: Well, it's just, it was interesting, there was this group at my university and they were called the Queens Homophile Association and I remember like peeking in, they would have a dance in the student center and I remember peeking in and going like "Oh this is so gross!" but like, why would I be peeking in? Like what's going on there? Then later after I graduated from college and I worked as a reporter, and this woman who started that organization was also working to change their curriculum, and then she suddenly became the person who was my hero, like I just always switched gears on that one. So like, um I would think I was just like, you know, processing my—my attraction to women through homophobia [laughter] so.

O' Brien: And at Cornell, what was the process of getting into activism like? Was it, would—were your politics changing quickly?

Currah: Yeah I think my politics changed um, you know grad students are always more radical, but my department which was government, which was political science, they were— they were not like these lefty boys and lefty women but, but they just, the queer thing was they were not used to it. So I was like the only out queer, maybe there was one other—no I guess there were four or five of us but like, people were just, they didn't talk about it and you didn't bring your—we'd always have beer on the quad on Friday night but you didn't bring your girlfriend or boyfriend if you were queer to that. So it was just like, so um, so I always hung around the more queer friendly humanities people you know, and all of my—I took all my courses there and at one point they were reviewing my transcript in the government department and they were like "This person has taken like, two thirds of their courses outside of the department" they didn't have any rules but, so I did [laughter] you know. Because I didn't like hanging around with, you know, guys with these kind of glasses that studied [inaudible] but you know, you know what I mean the kind of, the kind of, not homophobic but just kind of, we'd call them a bit of a bro, you know. So my activism really, you know, there was a little bit of work around this thing called, whatever that New York State gay rights group was called, but mostly it just started through ACT UP.

O' Brien: So this was the 80s?

Currah: Yeah, so that would've been, I went to grad school in '88 and I think Act Up Ithaca formed in like '89 or '90 when Ned Brinkley showed up. And it's always, in a way it's been kind of a detriment to my, my work as a [inaudible] processes, because when I'm in a meeting and people are talking about Robert's Rules of Order I like, I never have learned that, I never, I feel like asking for a second is just stupid, I feel like he should be asking for a [inaudible] watcher. You know and I just, I'm still stuck in that kind of, is it like, that more horizontalism moment and I feel like Robert's Rules of Order is like that evil terrible thing and I never learned it and, you know, even where I'm at I'm meeting at now I'm already, I have no idea about it, so. So, it was kind of a nice introduction to activism, because the formulism of many, you know, more old fashioned groups can just make you really bored and tired really quickly

O' Brien: And in ACT UP in Ithaca you guys worked on a jail campaign?

Currah: Yeah, we worked on a jail campaign because we were like, to our heroes in New York were like what should we do? And they were like "Well we're doing some stuff with the prisons so why don't you do some stuff on your local jail?" so we were like "Oh, right we will!" so we did. So we, you know, we got all the evidence and you know, people were doing good research down here with, I forget the research group that came in and backed up or preceded ACT UP or whatever. And we, um, so 'cause a—a lot, at the jail people were there for like a year so they're there, at least, you know, sometimes they're there for shorter but they could be there up to a year so there was definitely, and there was no HIV testing and there was obviously no condom distribution, so we worked on that. And we also, you know, coordinated with New York and we went down to the NH big protest, whenever that was, early '90s, and we would protest in Albany about the prison stuff, um, yeah, but our big thing was just the local jail, yeah.

O' Brien: Were there other folks involved in ACT UP in Ithaca or that you came into contact with in New York City that you're interested in sharing about?

Currah: Um, uh no I mean, I just—I'm not a very good person who remembers names, but I do remember like, there was a big, coming to meetings and seeing Maxine Wolfe who was like, you know, our idea of a famous person you know. Probably, she couldn't get an aisle seat on a plane she's that unfamous, but you know what I mean like [laughter] like [inaudible], because they had, some ACT UP women had done this book and we're like, we had all got copies of this book and we're like "Oh, that's Maxine Wolfe.." and, [laughter]. I think, um—because it was a lot, it was like ACT UP Ithaca was like a lot of—it was pretty good gender distribution, like, there wasn't any out trans people in it at the time though a lot of people turned out to be trans later but there was lots of, you know, people who identify as women and people who identify as men and, but we're sort of, more of a feminist ACT UP then. So we're like, [inaudible] the Maxine Wolfe kind of thing, um, yeah.

O' Brien: And then when did you, tell me about Queer Nation and forming the Queer Nation Chapter.

Currah: Yeah, I think we formed Queer Nation just in the sense of like we were trying to, you know, like everyone was saying, trying to dissociate ACT OUT from an identity based movement so Queer Nation became a bit—Queer Nation also was like, not supposed to be identity based, but it's more focused around queerness and we wanted to kind of suggest that activism concerned everybody and Queer Nation was around like, the policing of sexuality only, so. So, um, you know we did some things, like we did, you know we'd do some kind of "Queers Go Shopping" thing in the local mall, or we'd do like a—we did like a, "This is what Queers Look Like" thing in the downtown, you know, plaza area, you know, just kind of doing normal things but having big Queer Nation shirts. Like in Ithaca no one really cared, I mean that was, it was not like, it's very conservative surrounding Ithaca, it's basically the very top end of Appalachia but right in Ithaca it's like a college town, so. Um, and we did stuff, we did—I mean it wasn't like a weird, it was um, you know we—there was something going on where people thought their phones were being bugged, maybe they weren't, but there were some weird things happening with peoples' cars and the police in Ithaca back then, they used to go to the one gay bar and write down everybody's license plate number, and run their numbers which would have an effect on the local people. So they weren't great, you know, and we would get some nasty calls and we'd call the police and complain and they said "Well maybe you should move" you know [laughter]. So it's that, but like there's no real threat, but it was just little low level stuff. And one time—this is so embarrassing we thought we were so, kinda cool, but just when there were printers that, you know you could just do a laser printing and we like laser printed some stickers, I'm sure we stole some like, ACT UP [inaudible] sort of art, and we like stuck them all over the FBI parking spot places, like that was our big action, [laughter] like it's so embarrassingly teeny, but we were like hiding in the bushes and sticking these Queer Nation stickers over where the FBI parked their cars, it just—it's so ludicrous to think of it now but, that was our idea of like standing up to the man.

O' Brien: And you mentioned having a lot of—having I Don't Worship in contact with New York ACT UP, did you have contact with Queer Nation people outside of Ithaca? Was there, was it—

Currah: I don't think as much, I mean there was, you know we all had that, you know because we'd go down to the gay pride parades, like it was a big deal you know, going down, and then you know, there was that year they handed out Queers Read This: I Hate Straights which I still have a copy of. So I think we kind of picked up, sort of our marching orders from that and it was beginning to come into the academy with like, I think it was Lauren Berlant and um, I forget the other guys name, it'll come to me um, you know kind of wrote about Queer Nation and, um, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner wrote about Queer Nation. So we were kind of getting a sense of like, this is not just about like a, you know, like a safe assimilationist identity politics this is about like, the public representation of sexualities. Though it's interesting that at the time I had this professor who a lot of us really kind of adored, her name was Biddy Martin, she's now like the president of Amherst College. But she was saying you know like, "Just saying you're queer in public, that's not necessarily radical" and we're like...

O' Brien: [laughter]

Currah: What are you talking about of course it's radical! We're putting signs saying queers [inaudible] radical, and she's like "Well it probably depends on the process and maybe doing on the Ithaca commons is, you know, maybe that's a pretty not that radical thing" you know [laughter]. You know you take your professors and you like, you expect too much from them so like we were super mad at her [laughter] and of course, now I think she was super right, you know. But it was like, how dare she critique Queer Nation but, she was like super smart and she could like, read through all the theory and understand it and kind of get what its politics was and I think she thought some of the first iterations of queer theory were a little, you know sexist and didn't, you know. The way queer theory kind of positioned gender was boring in its initial stuff, she had this great article about how queer theory is kind of—its coolness and its fluidity is only possible because gender gets stuck as boring, you know, as unchangeable and...

O' Brien: What's her name again?

Currah: Her name is Biddy Martin, she actually goes by that if you look it up. So anyways there was this kind of queer stuff happening in the academia too, I remember going to some talk at Cornell, and the grad students go because you're supposed to go to the talks but we would also load up our foods with cheese, or our pockets up with cheese at the end and so on. But I remember seeing like, Susan Buck-Morss who was my professor and she's saying "Oh I wish—I wish I could be like you" I think she may have just said butches but she said like, brunches or something like, "You lesbians and brunches and stuff, you've all got the style and things are happening and you're all a big group" and so on, and she was kind of sweet like, she was trying to say like oh, you guys, you've got some kind of movement going on, but she couldn't even get the language. So, but I mean looking back it felt like it was this radical thing but it was like, it was like radical supported by the [inaudible] foundation, you know what I mean it was like the radicalness of grad students who were like—private stipends supported by, you know, the fortunes of robber barons [laughter] so it was kind of this kind of very safe space to think you had kind of radical politics. So it wasn't until I came to New York City where I was like oh, I see what they mean by the ivory tower, 'cause going from Cornell to teaching at CUNY (The City University of New York) was like, a huge shift you know, like classrooms were like, there aren't enough chairs for the people and you know, you had to buy your own chalk sometimes [laughter] you know like it was just a big shift and I was like, I was totally—hadn't really ever given much thought to certain kind of more class analysis [inaudible] took up my own job teaching primarily working class students.

O' Brien: That's very interesting, so it sounds like some of the emergence of academic queer theory happened while you were in graduate school and you were paying attention to it. You mentioned your research was queer inflected at the time?

Currah: Yeah, it wasn't like the most radical but it was basically looking at—I was looking at how gay people's identity was narrated in court cases. So, and that was you know, basically as you could imagine it was usually narrated as like "We're born this way." so I was kind of like, kind of studying that and you know pointing out the limitations of those kind of arguments, which

is obviously not rocket science now, but back then in the early '90s was more original [laughter] so. So then that was informed by queer theory too, yeah.

O' Brien: And that, what you just said, that's really interesting coming to CUNY and not having a class analysis and that not being part of the queer movements and scene you were in, and then actually confronting this big class difference and trying to think through that, what was that like?

Currah: Well it just takes a process of years, and I had a kind of stoppage around unions because as soon as I got here, and I had a partner when I moved down here, and um, at the time there was—and they did have same sex health benefits, but my union guy who was in my department and he was like high up in the union he's like, "Oh yeah when they gave those domestic partnership benefits we filed it unfair labor practices" you know, grievance, because they had been [inaudible] of [inaudible] and they just gave them. So we didn't want them but they gave them to us, so I was just like, "Can we swear on this?" I don't know why I was like "You jerk" like so I don't know, like they were, I was just like, "Why would you not allow your employees to do that?" so, but um—

O' Brien: Like it was during bargaining, or—

Currah: Yeah like they basically said, we didn't, that was low—that wasn't a real ask that was a fake ask you know, but we got it and didn't want it so, it was just, you know, so it made me kind of hate them, but you know I chilled out about the union over the years. Yeah no, it was—I didn't, queer theory didn't give me any kind of class analysis and you know to be honest I think it pays a lot of lip service to class and I think a lot of work that is done now in queer studies is good on class. But I think queer theory in itself is just kind of inescapably not good on class, um, you know there's people who use queer theory and are good on class, but queer theory itself it's just, you know it's kind of a reaction against a lesbian gay solidified identity, you know which is fine, but it's not a reaction against liberalism per say, it's a reaction against like, assimilationism. And it says like, oh yeah we should you know, not try to get married we should, have more radical politics but, I don't know I've always felt like, even with someone like Lisa Duggan's whose work is—I admire I think it's good but it comes out of a reaction against assimilationist tendencies, not a desire to like, live in a more equivalently distributed—you know a world things are distributed more equally, so. But you know, I think other people can make you know—find more positive aspects of class stuff in queer theory than I can but, I think I—[laughter] to be honest one, I kind of had a reaction against it because when I was working with the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, you know, and on the board there was a real mix of people from private and public institutions, and it just seemed very odd to me that the people from the private institutions who made twice as much as we did had free housing and benefits and stuff. Their critique of a certain kind of identitarian politics, it just seemed to me kind of problematic because their um, 'cause that they were critiquing people wanting they already had, like health insurance or housing, or tenure, you know, so I always felt like there's a certain—or like vacations in Hawaii, or shopping at Barneys, like there was just a certain kind of—like for me, I'm a very kind of literal person so I'm not very theoretically fancy. But I just like—there are these people with

these beautiful vacations and clothes and if they had Instagram they would've been lovely, and like, I just couldn't understand the class aspect of it, and of course now that I know more, you know about theories of Marxism like of course that's a long tradition of Marxist theory about rich people going on writing about class. But I think I had a reaction against, you know some of the stuff around identity politics 'cause at that point I was coming into identity politics under the kind of, under the transgender rubric and not so much that like, an assimilationist thing but just like, we need to have identification documents and if you want to call that assimilationist, okay. But people need them to get a drivers license then a drivers license to get on a plane, or apply for a credit card like, so I just found that at that point the queer stuff felt a little false to me.

O' Brien: What year did you start at Brooklyn College?

Currah: 1994.

O'Brien: And when did you start thinking about or connecting to trans stuff?

Currah: Well, I think I started connecting to trans stuff, um, you know a little bit at Cornell in that there was this movie that, Cornell had this kind of cinema with uh, Cornell's full of people who are there because of their partners who are overly educated so they had this, they had somebody programming all their films who was like, should've been in a much fancier place. But he brought in films that we didn't deserve, probably, were way too fancy for us. But he brought in some film, I think it was by Max [inaudible] or something, some trans film that would be ancient now. And we were like, we all went to see it, we're like, oh my god, you know, I can't remember what it's called, like it had man in the title, but, um, and that kind of opened up, like, oh, that's like the first time I'd ever thought about transgender in relation to myself, 'cause I had always just seen these representations of trans women on talk shows. I hadn't really ever given it much thought, you know, but it became something that I could identify with, I was trying to give it more thought. But, so I guess I came down here and then the late, the mid to late 90s I started going to conferences like there was this trans conference called True Spirit. It was in, like, the DC area every year or other conferences.

O'Brien: I went to a couple True Spirits.

Currah: Yeah, yeah, cool. So that was, that's kind of how I started to kind of recognize, and like, this is like something that could describe how I feel about my, how I feel and who I am. And it was good, and it was very, I found True Spirit, I mean it might have had some problems, but I thought it to be very ecumenical on like gender stuff. It was, yeah, you could be a feminine man, 'cause I was like, I never could be a really good butch 'cause I just didn't have the wherewithal. I couldn't fix things, I wasn't strong, I didn't go to the gym, and the idea that you could have a male gender identity and still just be a bit of a sissy was like, oh, okay. That kind of clicked for me. I do remember getting on some email list back when they were terrible, I don't even know how they worked. And I think, you know, I don't know what it was called, but it was a terrible list of trans men who were super misogynistic and crazy. Some guy was like, oh I feel bad 'cause I had my period, and everybody was like, oh what a wuss you are, what, you think that tampon

string is gonna stand in for your dick, you little faggot. They were just, like, super misogynist, and I think there was this, someone explained to me, I don't know if it's true, that there was like an east coast-west coast, where the west coast was much more rigid around gender stuff, the FTMs at the time in the 90s, and the east coast was more like, yeah just be yourself lalala. But anyway, so sometimes I would get, I would be on a couple of those lists and I would get scared off, and I would get scared off and go, oh those guys are mean, mean boys, I don't wanna hang out with that group. But then I found people who were much more chilled out around gender, I was like, okay, this is not so bad.

O'Brien: And was this the same period that you were engaged in your own transition or talking to people about being trans?

Currah: Yeah it was the same time, yeah, I didn't, like, come out, I didn't like actually transition until 2000, like publicly, in 2003, but I was like thinking about it for a long time, and working on it. And it's funny, I didn't get tenured until 2001, so I definitely wasn't gonna do anything before then. It might've been okay but it might not have been back then, so. But I definitely was thinking about it a lot and talking about it a lot, yeah. And I was doing a lot more trans activism and things like that.

O'Brien: Yeah. So you were around this emerging trans scene in the late 90s and early 2000s. What was it like politically, like what were people working on and what was people's politically analysis?

Currah: Yeah, so, it was basically, it was, um, it was very, it looks very liberal reformist, though I still think it's like [inaudible], maybe they're liberal reformists but you gotta function. I always remember this book by Patricia Williams, where she's, you know, does critical race theory, talking about hanging out with the Marxist guys, I forget what they're called, the critical legal studies people, and she was at Berkeley for the summer, and she talks about in her book, and how the Marxist guys are all critiquing any kind of liberal thing, and critiquing contracts and everything. And she was having this conversation as a black woman with this white guy, saying, he was like, oh yeah, why do you care about contracts, you're so liberal, and she was, you know to just get a sublease on my apartment, I had to FedEx every tax document for the last two years, and letters of recommendation, as a black person, like, I want that contract, and you could just shake your hand, as a white guy you could just shake a hand and get it, you know, get a nice apartment. I kind of think about that from people who criticize trans people trying to get identity documents that match their gender identity, it's like, well you have one, so like, throw your driver's license in the garbage then. So I think it was kind of based on a kind of, you know, just what the most primary needs were, like identity documents, and then also non-discrimination laws [coughs] and I don't think now that non-discrimination laws are the be all and end all, but I do think, like, I still think even symbolically they could be meaningful, but I mean, I think trans groups now have largely, no, are not putting all their eggs in that basket anymore which is a good thing. Yeah, so back in the late 90s a bunch of us started this group called the Transgender Law and Policy Institute, which, it was, um, [coughs] it was just meant to, just to kind of be a, just to kind of be a place, an organization that could make certain kinds of

arguments, 'cause some of the other people, Shannon Minter works in the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and Jennifer Levi worked for a gay rights organization in Boston [coughs], and James Green was there and Connor Brotus, Spencer Bergstedt, um, people like that, so we could kind of have this be a, this could be our voice, so with, put up policy documents. It was really just a web page, it was like, with no budget, and like, a few people, and it was all people who were trans men. And, you know, I would never do anything like that now, but the idea back then was like all these organizations, these other organizations were run and led by trans women, and there were no trans men involved, so it wasn't like exclusionary, it was like it's okay to have an organization with just trans men. I wouldn't do that now, but it was sort of a reaction against how the organizing was.

O'Brien: Was this in New York City, this group, or was it where?

Currah: It was national, 'cause people from like west coast, Boston, yeah different parts of the country.

O'Brien: Who was involved?

Currah: So Shannon Minter, he was on the west coast then, Spencer Bergstedt, somewhere on the west coast, Jennifer Levi in the Boston area, Connor Brotus Missouri, um, Spencer, that's probably about it, and Jamison Green, who I think was in California at that time. And then later Ginny Beeman joined us, and they were, you know, in Massachusetts or something like that, so it was like our first non-trans man person. So it, it was just a web page but we would do policy documents, so I started, I would do work the Sylvia Rivera Law Project around the birth certificates or, and that would be like an organization that would, you know, submit it. Like just on paper. You know, the web page, I kept it up, it was a lot of work, and it's still up there, I wish someone could take it down but we've lost control of the, no one knows who had the domain anymore so it just sits there, I don't know why it's still up. But you know, we kept track of all the non-discrimination laws and policies around jails and parenting and colleges, and it was just a clearinghouse of information.

O'Brien: Did you know many trans academics in the late 90s or early 2000s?

Currah: No, no, I'm trying to think, I mean Susan Stryker I met in the 1990s at some CLAGS (Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies) conference, and she was, like, at a Ph.D., but she didn't have an academic job. She was the writing the LGBT archives in San Francisco at that time, I think. I'm trying to think of any trans academics. I don't think I, I mean there must have been some, but I didn't know of any. There was just very few people.

O'Brien: Did you get involved in New York City based organizing?

Currah: Yeah, so, I think the Transgender Law and Policy Institute was started around 1998 or 99 and around the same time Pauline Park and I, and some other people, formed this other group called the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy, uh, NYAGRA. And that

was basically to work on the city and the state policies. So, um, yeah. And that was, that was sort of in the main group working on city and state policies, though we had a lot of support from, um, like Housing Works was really very involved in an advocacy level under, I think the guy's name was Charles King. And you know, various city councilors and so on. But it was, NYAGRA was like the main, the main group.

O'Brien: Do you remember who was involved in NYAGRA?

Currah: Yeah, it was Pauline Park and myself, David Valentine, who now teaches at University of Minnesota, Carrie Davis, who at the time I think was working at the Gender Identity Center, um, Sophia Pazzos, and then, um Joann Prinzivalli joined us, Melissa Sklarz, Roz Blumenthal was initially a member. There's people that, you know, there was like seven or eight people, um, and it was, it wasn't as easy as the Transgender Law and Policy Institute because the thing is about politics is like, doing politics with your friends is super easy, but it's not challenging, it's not gonna totally expand the envelope of the world, but it was like, there's just 100% trust, and NYAGRA was a very different kind of situation, 'cause there's just, there's more, there was less trust, but there was still an email so emails could be forwarded. It was a good group of people but there was like, it was more easily disruptable I think. And some people, you know I think in terms of organizing, there's just people you're gonna meet and who you work with who have experienced trauma, you know, and it's, and they organize, they have different issues, and they lack trust, understandably, because of the trauma. So I just think that, you know, it was much more, there was some difficult moments for sure.

O'Brien: Do you remember anything about that process of founding NYAGRA and the initial?

Currah: You know, I remember, I don't remember too much, I think we, I think we met at this guy David Valentine's place, and we were, it was sort of a, in the terms of today, a horizontal organization. It was just, like, I think we called ourselves a working group, initially, and we wanted to work on like, getting New York State to pass a bill that included sexual orientation and gender identity, and that was our main goal, and so we had to work with the gay rights groups on that.

O'Brien: What year was it formed?

Currah: Uh, I think it was, I can't remember if it was 1998 or 1999. We started talking about it in '98, but, I was trying to find all my old email records, but I could only find them back to 2006.

O'Brien: Do you remember some of how that campaign unfolded?

Currah: Well, I do remember we went to the Empire State Pride Agenda and we were, you know, ever so politely told to like, well, you know what activists like you do, you start local, [inaudible] show these legislators, like, towns in their area will pass a transgender rights bill and then they'll be more likely to support a transgender rights bill in the state level. Which is really annoying because a lot of jurisdictions in this state didn't have sexual orientation rights bill, or

cities didn't have those, but they were asking, they were trying to get the state to pass a sexual orientation bill, so. But we were basically ever so politely shooed away. And I think it was like, you know, people were just weren't into transgender issues, they just thought it would like, there was this old phrase that would kill the bill. I mean, that would happen with the HRC, I remember with, meeting with the HRC board of directors in the late '90s or early 2000s around transgender stuff, and they were just, you know, really against it. You know, Elizabeth Birch, who ran HRC, literally said over my dead body will we include gender identity. And she's a good person, and she came around 180 degrees, but like initially, that's where a lot of these cis gay people were, like they didn't want to be associated with this ragtag crew. Like I think I remember Elizabeth Birch told, um, kind of basically said something like, well what does gay, what does transgender stuff have anything to do with gay stuff. It's like, why would, it's like a totally separate issue, why would we even take it on. And we were trying to say, well, there's, some of us were academics, well there are, sexuality and gender are always intertwined, and she just kind of saw these constituencies and she saw, like, there are gay people, nice gay people with nice well cut suits, and then there are you people, you ragtag, you know, bunch of people who don't, don't even know how to wear clothes right, whatever gender you are. So it was like kind of class stuff going on too.

O'Brien: That sounds like class.

Currah: Yeah, [laughter] yeah. So, um, yeah, we got that response and the national level, we got that response. The Empire State Pride Agenda level. I mean eventually Empire State Pride Agenda, they went so far as to, like, pretend, to pretend to try to get gender identity included. But then they would say, well we asked, but they said they wouldn't. And I think what actually happened is the legislator who said they wouldn't, I think Ross Levi and the Empire State Pride Agenda, people were saying, yeah you don't wanna include this, do you, we don't. So they basically sold us down the river, and it was like, I think it was like a really embarrassing moment for the head leaders at ESPA because it's, you know, it was just a bit too late for them to be selling trans people down the river, they should've known better by that time. I mean these people, you know what happens when the head of a gay rights organization loses their job, or it closes down, is they just go work for a foundation. They always land very nice jobs, but they just kind of closed us down a few years ago because they thought their work was done because gay people had the right to marry.

O'Brien: Before GENDA [The Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act] passed.

Currah: Yeah, well before GENDA passed. Well, they tried to say that a Cuomo executive order was just the same as GENDA. And the executive order covers state employees and people who contract with the state, but it's, symbolically it doesn't have as much power. Legally it doesn't have as much power, and it's just nothing, but they somehow, they actually got, they went so far as to get, the people who run this project—I forget what it's called but it's called The Movement Advancement Project. And they have all of these great maps, and they got them to color in New York as if it had a gender inclusive gender identity law. I emailed the guy who I knew and I was like, Logan [Casey], New York doesn't have such a law. And he's like, oh they said they did, and

you've got that executive order so it's just as good, and I'm like, no it's not as good you need to wipe that out. Um, til' it just passed last year, but um, yeah that was a real—that was a real disappointment, yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. So trying to get included in SONDA [The Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act] and being politely shooed away things did blow up at one point around some that more visibly.

Currah: Yeah, I mean I think, as I recall my memory's not as good as other people's on this, but as I recall like, we just realized we were being sold down the river and like, you know we started talking to whatever gay press there was, which still mattered back then, you know. I mean I guess—I don't even know if there's a, there's no gay newspaper in print anymore in New York City is there?

O'Brien: I think the Gay City News might still print, I'm not sure.

Currah: But it—back then it kind of mattered, like that was you know, so when like they, Tom Duane (Thomas Duane) wasn't very good on hate crimes bill or, or you know, the people from the Empire State Pride Agenda we could—we had a bit more of an outlet to go and complain and so they would be more embarrassed, but it didn't change the fundamental dynamics of it. Because they wanted the non discrimination and they got it in like, I don't know when that was 2003 or something, and then eight years later they got same sex marriage and that's, you know, that was the end of that, so.

O'Brien: Do you remember about your own experience of being a part of that organizing, I hear there was conflict and trauma and some difficulty, what was it like for you?

Currah: Um yeah, I'm a conflictive risk person so I don't like conflict, but there was—I do remember like with a couple people who were working with NYAGRA they were really mad at us, mad at everybody. And then there was one person, I was sort of associated—or no, some of them I don't know, who said I was a CIA spy you know like a lot of—and I was like, I was thinking if I was going to be a spy wouldn't it be an FBI spy, but whatever. She was like—there was just a lot of paranoia about who people were and what their intentions were like—why would a CIA spy work on passing a transgender, like, and if anyone's trying to disrupt the organization in a kind of quid quo pro way, it's not me it's somebody else. There was just kind of distress and other craziness and, you know, I don't really like that. On the other hand, the two—the one person who was very disruptive and her partner, they also like, they had a house where they housed homeless trans women and they did this incredible stuff for the community and they took care of people and they spent their own money and they did whatever they had to keep trans women alive so I—that was like, such important work that they were doing and they didn't get any help or they didn't get any credit, you know they didn't get any like "Oh you're"—they didn't get any awards. They just had this thing called Transy House in Brooklyn, I think [inaudible] stayed there sometimes, they just took care of people you know. So I think like looking back I can see there was this kind of like, even though NYAGRA had a working group, I

guess later had a board of directors, but it was just more of a kind of like "We are going to change the law! We are going to talk to legislators and make things right!" versus these people who have been living on the streets and then taking care of people off the streets and dealing with all of that. And like it just turned out to be oil and water, you know looking back, you know wish we could've you know, gotten money for Transy House—or like done more stuff to have kind of evened that out. Because they, in the larger scheme of things they might have done more better than we did, you know in terms of providing shelter and food to people.

O' Brien: That's a really interesting framing of it, I've heard stories from both sides of that divide but that way of thinking about the tension.

Currah: Yeah so, and I mean I think I'm vaguely in touch with one of those people because of social media but I'm still kind of scared of the other one [laughter] just—I'm kind of a scared person, but um. Yeah so it's too bad I mean, but NYAGRA—there's no way which NYAGRA was any kind of grassroots organizing thing you know, we had people, you know we had hardly anybody [inaudible] I think Lisa Maur was involved, from Ithaca but it was—but there wasn't many people upstate it was no grassroots stuff it was just like, here is something that we can fix in the law and that's you know, find some experts and find a fix and that will just solve everything. You know, and of course the thing that will affect trans people the most is alleviating poverty and homelessness you know like—but NYAGRA did not have that kind of structural approach so, I mean I don't think it was bad what it did but it was certainly not going to do—change the larger shape of people's lives. I mean, non discrimination laws like, it just seems so unimportant compared to homelessness but they're, they're obviously related I understand but, and poverty, and incarceration and all of that. I do think it's interesting, I mean, the National Center for Trans Equality like, they have a kind of way of narrating, they talk a lot more about incarceration than they used to which is good, but they have this way of narrating how everything good will happen as a result of passing a non discrimination law. Like if you pass a non discrimination law then trans people will be able to get jobs and keep their jobs and will not end up on the street and therefor will be—you know will have to do survivor based activity and be arrested by police and end up in jail. And it's like, that's a narrative and there might be a little bit of truth to that but it's just like the perfect neoliberal narrative it's like, "If you let everybody work and be a productive citizen then we won't have people in jail" it doesn't—it doesn't look at poverty, it doesn't look at the structural nature of it, it doesn't look at the fact that the carceral system is a for profit enterprise that a lot of people make money off of. So, you know, looking back it's a very kind of limited approach and I wish we could—and I think activists, you know the more radical activists obviously, but even places like NCT now are getting better at talking about poverty per say, rather than, "Oh if they have a job then they won't be poor" you know, so.

O' Brien: When did NYAGRA Fall apart?

Currah: Um, I don't exactly know when I, I think I kind of stepped—after the passing city bill, I mean I kept going onto those meeting about hate crimes bill and GENDA, I just think—I can't remember what I stepped away but, I kind of couldn't handle all of the drama and boredom of all

those emails and slights and—so I'm not so I don't, I think Pauline (Park) kept NYAGRA going for a while, so I'm not sure when that eventually folded.

O' Brien: When did you step away?

Currah: I don't know, maybe around 2004, '05, around then maybe?

O' Brien: Was there a different landscape of trans organizing happening in New York that you had contact with or got involved in?

Currah: I think I was, I think I just felt like—Pauline had like, she had a lot of time to devote to it and she could do the work, and I had a day job and I had to kind of start to eventually, you know, teach and there's things I missed like I missed the day the city bill passed because I had a class that day and didn't think to cancel it. I think I kind of decided to do more national organizing because it seemed kind of sexier and it didn't seem to be quite so frothy with all of these personality conflicts so, that's sort of why I stepped away. And then I started doing—yeah I guess I was just more interested in federal policy and not the New York State stuff

O' Brien: What was the happening on the federal—

Currah: Well, kind of the same stuff it's like would the Human Rights Campaign allow gender identity to be put into a federal non discrimination bill—

O' Brien: 2004 was when that all blew up right?

Currah: Yeah, there was a big kind of demo and stuff yeah, that blew up—

O' Brien: Tell us about that.

Currah: Well you know I think we all—a bunch of people went to D.C and we it was all planned and we made some presentation to, I don't know if it was the high top staff in the board you know, and everybody's super polite and you know, but we couldn't quite extract a perfect promise that they would never, they would absolutely not support a bill that didn't include gender identity, so that was disappointing. I think what HRC is like, they're the only game in town in some sense because they have so much money but they have actually zero legislative accomplishments they've never done anything, you know. So why we pay attention to them I don't know, but the head of HRC recently stepped down named Chad Griffin he, he had a biography commissioned about him and his role in the movement for same sex marriage that literally described himself—described him, as the Rosa Parks of same sex marriage. It's just like, insane like, they never have accomplished anything and yet they suck all of the money away from the state and local grassroots group, they spend it in Washington, they get no bills passed—they might've saved some HIV funding I don't know. They've never accomplished a thing and they get all of the attention, it's very, it's kind of very shocking, but I think one of the problems at that level is like everyone thinks of all of these biographies of the famous people in

the civil rights movement, and they're like, "Oh the gay movement, is this going to be like that? I want to be that famous person." so everybody's kind of writing memos for posterity instead of trying to get work done. They're trying to like, "Oh I want to be the Thurgood Marshall or I want to be the Ruth Bader Ginsburg of this" you know, and writing—trying to establish their place in history before they kind of, actually accomplish what they're trying to accomplish. So it's very ego—because you have the people who went to elite schools, elite law schools, elite clerkships, and then they're running these organizations and, you know, they're not do-gooders, really, they're not, so.

O' Brien: Yeah, and so where was your research at during this time you came out as trans, academically? Or—

Currah: Yeah, I came out as trans in 2003 and that was fine. At that moment I was not teaching as much because I was running a center for lesbian gay studies. So it was like, I teach a course a semester, I go there, teach one course at night. And I didn't know what the students thought about me, like who I was, like I'm not one of those teachers that kind of, I don't like, talk to them about myself. I'm not touchy feely so, who knows what they thought about me transitioning—well I did see some, there were some nasty things that some people wrote on the student evaluations. I basically survived that period by just doing programming and raising money for the center for lesbian gay studies and you know, doing a lot of trans programming. Like we had huge conference in 2005, trans editor conference with you know, a lot of activists and, you know. It was pretty cool, we did a [inaudible] policy roundtable, like you know, it was lot of trans stuff happening CLAGS (Center for LGBTQ Studies). And I'm sure there was some grumbling in the background but they hadn't done any forever so, it was little time to recompense.

O' Brien: So, trans studies is really starting to emerge in some sort of way or—

Currah: Well there's always been a group of people doing what we now call trans studies and, you know I think—it's sort of [inaudible] around Susan Stryker because, you know she wrote this essay back in 1994 called My Words to Victor Frankenstein and that's like this kind of founding moment in trans studies. And then, this is all kind of very, in the weeds academic detail but—and then in 1988, 1998, she had a special issue of GSQ on trans studies, that was a really big deal. And then, she and I and another person edited a special issue of a woman's studies journal on trans studies—there's all these special issues of journals on trans studies like, "Oh this is something!" but um, and there's lots of interest in it and lot of people writing about it and reading about it and dissertations being written about it. It didn't really have a place in the academy yet so—I mean there is this one journal called the International Journal of Transgender Studies, but it's very social sciency, or sciency, and it's very doctorish and medical, and that has it's place, 'cause it could be used in, you know, in research. I think trans studies basically is—you know Susan Stryker was sort of single handedly kind of just brought that into being, you know. We started this journal called TSQ, Transgender Studies Quarterly, we were shopping a proposal around since 2010, and it took a while to get it some interest, and then in 2014 it first came out, and that was a big deal. And at the same time she got, she parlayed a job offer from some other institution into like, "I'll stay at the University of Arizona if you give me four

lines to hire trans—for trans studies lines." So, it started to kind of really, you know, take off—well take off in a relative sense it's not like it's business school, but. You know, there were some jobs and when I look at the job market now I see lots of jobs advertised, they want people to be able to teach about transgender issues so it's really changed a lot in the last ten years. And I'm glad to have been a part of that, I have to say, Susan Stryker is like the main force behind it.

O' Brien: What would you say your place in that formation and development has been?

Currah: Um, well I am a kind of, I'm kind of a person who likes to get things done and you know. So I'm more of a—I can do logistics and figure things out and, make sure the acceptance rate is good for the journal and make sure the word count is right. Then I have my own special, you know, issues that I would put on topics that interest me. But I think it's [inaudible] am just kind of a bit of a work horse. And I think a little bit—you know my therapist always says I'm putting my self down and I have to stop but, a little bit I was a bit of a balance to Susan because she's like humanities and I, you know I'm trying political theory but I'm also interested in policies, so a little more social sciency as a bit of a balance, so it wasn't just super fun but wacky humanities stuff.

O' Brien: Yeah I feel like there's a big trans legal thinking world of uh—that includes a lot of policy but mostly done by lawyers. And then a big trans studies rooted in the humanities that reflects a lot of the concerns and debates of humanities, but not a lot of trans social science, that is actually trying to think in trans categories.

Currah: Yeah I think you're exactly right, I think that sort of changed on the dissertation committees that I'm on from different places. Like I can see that starting to change, like people are using trans studies to think through concretely like, you know, issues. Because the way I like to do—I was trying to do political theory, but I don't want to just talk about John Rawls what could be more boring? I like to take a problem and, you know, think about it in a theoretical way. So when I would do stuff on sex classification like, why are there so many different policies? And that leads me to kind of think about like, "Oh sex is doing different things for different state projects and—" so I think in a way like, there is other work that is being done on that kind of vein that uses these kind of categories but actually looks at something real, you know. I mean I'll just say, 'cause hopefully no one will listen to this, but like I always find that true about queer theory or feminist theory or now trans study is like, there's some really good theory and it's in a novel about a goddamn—or it's in an essay about a goddamn novel. It's like, who cares about the novel just give me the theory, that's what I want. It's like all these really smart people are writing about novels and it goes back in grad school I had this theory like, the Owen Foundation knows what it's doing, and the [inaudible] know what they're doing. They take the most brilliant people, and they stick them in english departments, because you can do the least damage to the corporate structure of the world there, because they're going to focus on the novel and not like, Securities and Exchange Commission or something, so [laughter]. So I think with this new kind of group of people doing transgender studies I think they're kind of combining theory in the social science empericle studies in a good way.

O' Brien: Yeah, so you've seen a growth of that then, in the last few years?

Currah: Yeah, yeah definitely yeah, so and I hope it continues and it's hard because the job—the best thing to do is to have a job, to do that from a [inaudible] job, and there's just fewer and fewer jobs, and more and more adjuncts in the objectification of higher education, so that's not a good time for trans studies to try and spread its wings.

O' Brien: So what was happening in your personal life outside of your organizing and—so work, and academic work, like 2000's, early 2010's.

Currah: Yeah, so my academic—yeah so I wrote, I was writing a lot of review articles on transgender stuff which is, [inaudible] and I had done this transgender policy guide about how to—like what transgender, like what a transgender legislation can look like. So I tried to turn my activism and I tried to tweak it a little bit and throw it in a law review article so it could sort of count for a scholarship. You know, which I got away with, I wouldn't get away with in a fancier institution like, law reviews are not really—they are sort of looked down upon because they aren't really peer reviewed, but people in law schools can do them, and I got away with it I think because at CUNY they just weren't paying attention. Then you know, I worked—we had this book called Transgender Rights, I had a bunch of essays that, came out in 2006, and that was a real milestone. I mean there were some good pieces in there, but I think collectively as a whole just like the existence of a book like that made a difference. Yeah, but in the last years I started to kind of like, not do as—hardly do any activism because they're so many activists and they're actually paid to do this job so they, they don't need volunteers like me showing up. Now I just go to big demonstrations about immigration or something to be counted but, yeah I don't need to do like, how to write your legislator kind of things. So what I'm more interested in now is like—at that stage of my career is like stepping back and not being an activist so that in my work, I kind of look at like—I take the luxury of looking at all these like, totally messed up, you know, constructions of sex in the law and policy and instead of getting totally furious and mad like I used to, I just say, "Okay let me just see this as interesting, like an interesting problem to untangle" like what does it mean about the state, what does it mean about the market, what does it mean about the people. So, I feel like now I have the luxury of not, not just being angry and just actually being a researcher and a scholar and just being able to figure out something over a long historical trend, but before I was just, you know like, "Oh this is terrible! We have to fix this! We have to get past these non discrimination laws." And now I'm just more like, "Well why does the homeless shelter—why do homeless shelters house trans women with women and why don't jails?" And you know, why can you change your [inaudible] view here but not there? And just trying to figure out these things to try and have a better understanding of like, what governments are up to. 'Cause I feel like, with trans activists now and kids in college, they can deconstruct gender like up and down, it's totally denaturalized. They haven't read Marx, they can't denaturalize the state, they still, no matter how radical they are about gender, they still kind of in the back of their mind think of the state as like, it's supposed to be this benevolent night watchmen. Like, they still don't get what it's supposed to do, and similarly with the market, they don't—they might talk about the market a little bit or corporate stuff is bad, but they don't really get how evolved and kind of individualized in terms of these kind of like homo economicus

self branded kind of people. So, I'm just trying to kind of raise those issues more, because yeah we've all deconstructed gender and that's fine, we're really good at it, but let's also figure out larger politics. Because I think some people kind of confuse like radical gender politics with radical politics, and they're not the same [laughter] they could be continuous or they could be adjacent but it's not exactly the same. So, when I give talks I have, like even the category of transgender, it does a lot of covering up of differences, as I'm sure you know, so you have a kid from Middlebury talking about transgender people and the risk of incarceration and violence. And like, you have zero risk of incarceration, like really, unless you do an insider trade and you get stuck—you get caught at Goldman Sachs, you're not going to be in jail. Like when you say we transgender people, you insist like, there's a certain kind of violence in not acknowledging like, how really the vulnerability structure around like class and race matter the—like that's what harms transgender people. I mean, not to say that—I was talking about this with a former student who was really smart and she says, "You just—everyone discounts someone's psychic pain, it's real they feel damaged and wounded." So I don't do that, I should not do that, but at a larger scale like, it's just like we are not all screwed up, you know I'm a tenured professor I mean, probably if I killed someone I could lose my job, but it's not sure, I might keep it I mean—

O' Brien: And you waited for tenure, where it came out so, like the risk of employment discrimination even in your very class privileged situation was yeah—

Currah: Yeah, yeah it was there in the beginning yeah. I just think like, I just think we have to find ways of talking about the market and talking about like, states, you know, and I feel like—and I'm getting all anxious about the election again and I'm getting anxious about all the—people are mad at Bernie (Sanders) again and it's like, there's nothing—Sanders is not going to screw transgender people he just doesn't talk about that kind of stuff, he's not good at it. The kind of changes he would make, working elected, you know with some luck with other houses, would have a bigger difference on transgender people than Joe Biden who never stops talking about transgender people. You know like, so I just think like, the people are so quick to take offense to if they don't say transgender they think, "Oh he hates transgender people." I feel like we have to do much more work to, kind of create that trust I guess.

O' Brien: You haven't mentioned being a—talking about being a parent much, tell us about that.

Currah: Yeah, I um, it's kind of funny talking about same sex marriage because I got married in 2008, to an academic and we have a child, yeah we're divorced, but it's kind of funny because same sex—well whatever kind of marriage you want to call it, I mean I don't know if it's a same sex marriage or an opposite sex marriage. Because New York didn't recognize same sex marriages, but it would've recognized opposite sex marriages, whatever it was a marriage. You know, that marriage was kind of good for me, it kind of secured my—and I could've adopted a kid but it did a nice job of kind of securing my parental rights, it secured my position, you know, in a divorce. So when people criticize marriage, I'm like, you know it actually—it is about money or property, it's about making those divisions equal, so it's not exactly the most evil thing in the world. Yeah, so now like I'm a single dad half the time—yeah I live in a house, a duplex, and my ex lives in a duplex above me, so the kid just goes back and forth, yeah.

O' Brien: That sounds convenient, as ex situations go.

Currah: I mean my ex did run off with a trans guy twenty years younger than me so that was kind of an, "Ouch!" You know, it was like, oh am I old? Maybe? I guess I am old.

O' Brien: And what do you for fun?

Currah: Um, I don't know I like—I uh, I putter around, fix up the house. Like I'm not a handyman but I'm like, "Okay there's a project and I'm going to accomplish it this Saturday!" And with, you know, four trips to Lowe's, and a couple of broken things I'll accomplish it. I like to run, I'm going to run—probably run in that gay pride race on Saturday. And I ran in this Brooklyn pride race a month ago, and it was—it was very sweet but Brooklyn is still Brooklyn and it was sort of backwater, they had these weird categories like you could be, male, female, or transgender. So, I mean they just kind of had—they had a company in Long Island didn't forward them and they probably didn't know what to do. So on a lark I just chose transgender, which I would never do in that case because I feel like it's sort of like, "Oh, so I'm not a man?" So I chose transgender and I won in my age category, it's the first time in twenty years of running 'cause I—the fastest transgender man, aged between fifty and fifty-nine. So, I won like a fifteen dollars iTunes gift card or something, but uh I'm glad—that was the only time I've ever won something for being transgender, so I'm like, click that box [laughter]. So, yeah, you know, I'm going to go camping with my daughter in a couple of days, I like to go nature camping but she likes to go car camping so we go to a park in the Catskills. And there's a big tent city and it's just like Brooklyn to her, she's like, "Oh this is fun!" It's—and I'm kind of an introvert so it's like, "Oh God she's going to go talk to all of these people." So she's—camping for her is like another social experience like a little tent city, so anyways.

O' Brien: Why did you decide to do this interview?

Currah: I don't know, I think someone a couple of years ago asked me and I meant to say yes. I don't know I guess—I thought, you know before I totally lose my memory, talk about what I know, what I think I know, and also I have a more of a sense like, of limitations of what I was doing earlier it was—it felt, it probably was necessary but it was kind of interesting to reflect on that.

O' Brien: Was there stuff from your life that you wanted to share that you didn't get to?

Currah: Um, I don't think—I don't think so, you're a good interviewer. I mean I'm a kind of private person I don't think I would do tons of detail about my private self but—yeah, no it's been good.

O' Brien: Do you have any hopes for where trans studies, or the trans movement, might be going?

Currah: Well for the trans movement I think it's going this way with the youth, is to recognize that like, racism and poverty and immigration—I think is just becoming much more, just a commonly agreed upon belief. Like fixing those problems is going to do the most to alleviate trans people. I think it's always good to talk in generational terms, there are lots of radical older trans activists too, but I just notice like through Facebook and so on, there's all these total [inaudible] trans men and women around there, and I'm so psyched to see that, I had no idea until I started poking in there on Facebook and so on. And I think that's just a really exciting development, so, I feel very hopeful about that, in trans study it's just really tricky because in just, higher education in general is just so—the labor is so precarious there and like, I think trans studies is sort of doing well, but if there are not going to be jobs for anybody that's going to harm innovation, and people doing there work out there. Maybe there'll be free college and they'll get more money to higher education.

O' Brien: Sounds great, thank you so much Paisley.

Currah: Thank you so much Michelle.

O' Brien: I appreciated this.