

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DAVEY DAVIS

Interviewer: Jay Graham

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Jay Graham: Hi, my name's Jay Graham, and I'll be having a conversation with Davey Davis for the NYC Trans Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It's April 17th, 2024, and this is being recorded at the Brooklyn Public Library. Hi, Davey.

Davey Davis: Hi, Jay. How are you?

Graham: I'm good. How are you doing?

Davis: Good.

Graham: So I was thinking maybe we could start by talking about your books—your novels and your writing more broadly—and then maybe we can kind of fall back and talk about your background more.

Davis: Sure, sounds great.

Graham: Your first book, *the earthquake room*, came out in 2017, and it's set in this dystopic Oakland but also a very familiar Oakland, and it begins with this scene where the character k discovers that she has transmitted a disease to her girlfriend. Can you tell me a little bit about why you were interested in exploring and centering STIs and STDs in this book?

Davis: Yeah. *the earthquake room*, it's a very anxious book, and it's kind of about the ways in which you take a big disaster and kind of push it out of the way with much smaller disasters. It's been several years since I wrote it, but in retrospect ... Not that anyone's feelings about whatever STI they have aren't real or valid, but a sore is really not that big of a deal. But if you're invested in a distraction, it's actually a great way to get distracted. I was also really interested in intimacy and having a close study of a crumbling relationship where no one is really doing anything wrong but in which the misunderstanding is the problem, I guess. And I feel like the smallness of a sore or a microbe is an interesting metaphor for stuff that can be really big and feel really big and is much less important and scary than, you know, "the big one" that is eventually going to happen on the West Coast. So yeah, that's kind of where it started.

Graham: Yeah, so when you said taking a small distraction and focusing on it to avoid a larger crisis, you're referring to climate change, right?

Davis: Yeah, but at the time I wrote the novel I was very fixated on earthquakes—

Graham: Specifically—

Davis: Yeah, and when I started writing it, we still weren't starting to have fire season in California yet—the ways in which in the last six or seven years, climate change and climate catastrophe has escalated and become more prominent, especially here in the global north. It would probably be a different book if I wrote it now, but the anxiety for me at the time was that.

Graham: That natural disaster, specifically, yeah. Can you say a little bit more about why writing about a relationship in which there's this discovery of a sore helped you think about intimacy more broadly?

Davis: I think a lot of the time, especially when you're younger, especially when you're kind of new to romantic relationships, and especially as queer people ... I don't think straight people have better relationships, but I do think we have to come into our adult lives with a lot more baggage around intimacy and trust and what constitutes a healthy relationship, especially a healthy romantic relationship. We don't really get models for that, by and large. So it's kind of like when you have a hammer everything looks like a nail, and when you don't have a hammer ... This metaphor is getting a little tortured. But basically, if you don't even know how to find or identify or explain what is wrong, what you have available ends up being something that's usually a scapegoat or, like I said, a distraction. And it's a lot easier and a lot more obvious to talk about something like an STI than it is to talk about codependence or, especially when I was writing the novel, things I didn't even have language for yet myself. I'm also really interested in queer contagion and the feeling of being a threat or a danger because you're queer or because of the way that your body is and the way that that poses a threat to people who are close to you, and that bears out to different kinds of pathogens and illnesses. But for both STIs and, whatever, your sexual orientation or whatever, both of those things, even if you could damage another person by causing them to become queer or changing them, there's still no fault. And that's how I feel about STIs and illnesses of all kinds. There's no value judgment there. It's just something that's happening to your body. But that's hard for people to wrap their heads around, as I'm sure you're aware. So it's an interesting place to play, when we take therapeutic language or these concepts about accountability or blame and then we apply them to things that they don't actually really apply to. And it kind of becomes this big mess, especially, like I said, if you're a young queer person and you don't have the language or models or support to have a healthy romantic relationship.

Graham: So you wrote that book pre-Covid, and here we are in 2024. Did your experience during Covid affect in any way how you thought about the things you were exploring in that

book? You know, I think also during Covid a lot of queer people were thinking about the resonances between the pandemic and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Davis: It's an interesting ... I did think about it a lot, especially because during Covid I was in this really unique situation where my older sister is very disabled and needs 24/7 care and support, so when Covid started basically her care situation was she either stays in her home with her in-home care and doesn't see her family or she stays with her family and doesn't get any care. So my mom was like, It's all hands on deck. I need help. But my mom and I have a very bad relationship, so I ended up spending—and it was just when I had started T, so I was redoing puberty with my abuser in her house. I was redoing my teenage years, a little bit. And it was really challenging, but what was so interesting about it was—even though I had already reached this point where I was like, There's nothing wrong with me—all of these neuroses I'd had as a younger person about contaminating other people with my queerness, I had to revisit them in kind of a really real one-on-one way at the same time while managing ... Especially in the early days of the pandemic when there was way less information about how it was spread and what the long-term effects were and all that, I had to be hypervigilant because my older sister can't manage Covid safety for herself, and also in any situation where she gets sick she can't be sick alone. But at the time, if people were ill, they were completely quarantined, right? And this is a person who can't advocate for herself. So that was my nightmare. So on the one hand, I'm unpacking all this internalized homophobia and transphobia I didn't even know I had, because I was with, you know, my horrible mother. And then on the other hand, it's a very literal management of contagion and illness. So I guess to answer your question, the metaphor of the earthquake room kind of comes back to haunt me. That was my first exposure—I think a lot of people's first exposure—to that kind of fear and management of illness, obviously not everybody's first. It's funny, as an artist, you have these themes that you return to. You circle them like a drain. And you're kind of just doing it your whole life. And I love that. That's a pleasure. That's very interesting to me. But sometimes, they haunt you a little bit. And sometimes you're like, I'm done with the theme! And it's like, No, I'm hanging over your shoulder. There's a pandemic, and we're going to be worried about germs. Yeah, so it was an interesting experience.

Graham: I want to ask one more question about *the earthquake room*. I'm curious, was that project for you connected to a larger project around sexual liberation in any way?

Davis: Only in the sense that that's a value of mine. And to be really honest, I started hormones, I guess, a year after that book came out, and I consider everything I did before that, like, I was not using my brain. Everything was reactive. Everything was kind of an expression of sublimated, repressed whatever. There wasn't a lot of focus or mental coordination. I wasn't

using my brain. So, while, yeah, total sexual freedom is kind of how I think ... I should say “total sexual agency” is my idea of an ideal social organization, or whatever. I can’t really say that a lot of it, I don’t really feel was ...

Graham: Maybe premeditated in that way?

Davis: Yeah. I’m not going to say “half-baked,” but things were happening separate from what’s going on up here.

Graham: So then maybe we can move to *X*, which came out almost almost two years ago, two summers ago. That novel is taking inspiration from noir and crime novels and is following various characters throughout the warehouses of Brooklyn—sadists and sex workers. You have talked about your resistance to policies like FOSTA/SESTA that you’ve called whorephobic. First, what’s your relationship to organizing around that, if you have one?

Davis: FOSTA/SESTA happened not too long after I stopped doing sex work, but I was involved in organizing around it because all of my friends were still workers. And obviously, it’s something that is important because it impacts sex workers but also, as sex workers were predicting at that time, it was going to have extreme implications for internet freedom, for everybody down the road, which is playing out. So at this point in time, I haven’t worked in a long time, but that’s still my community. And again, even if it did not affect my community, it’s something that affects ... Not to say that whorephobic legislation does not impact those people most and first, but the overlap and the cross-section between workers and people of color and poor people and trans people and queer people are so undeniable that it should matter to every gay person. That should matter to every person who doesn’t want their sexual behavior or their gender identity to be surveilled or used as pretext for state discipline—and worse. So when I was writing *X*, I was thinking about—and it’s only escalated—but concerns about internet privacy being affected by government surveillance, especially as it pertains to sex work online. So a kind of a leitmotif of that book is people thinking outside the box. Like, okay, how am I going to be marketing myself? Even if you’re able to post your content on a platform like onlyfans, or even if you make your own website, you have to deal with credit card companies and banks and whether or not they’re going to process your payments. These vendors have to work with you, and if they randomly decide that they’re not going to because you’re a worker, then tough titty. You’re out of luck, and you don’t really have any recourse for that. So when I was writing *X*, I was like, okay, well, what are we doing if we can’t use the internet to connect with each other because that’s essentially a brothel, or that’s solicitation? Or, when any kind of organization or relationship among workers is criminalized, then how do we communicate with each other and prospective clients safely? Okay, well, analog. I have a sibling who’s seventeen,

and a couple years ago they came into the room, and they were like, Hey, what's a "zine" [pronounced like *mine*]? Because they had never heard of a zine before. And I was completely floored by it. But also, there's so much ... Unfortunately, people have had to make alternatives, and that includes printed materials or cards or things like that or other kinds of communication. So anyway, it was just an interest of mine at the time, especially because I was thinking about, not necessarily a dystopian future, but maybe a parallel timeline or something that's two minutes in the future, and how people are going to be responding to that.

Graham: Yeah. Have you been involved in a lot of zine-making in your life?

Davis: No. I mean, I've contributed to a couple, but I was never a zine person.

Graham: Okay. But you're interested in that sort of microculture—

Davis: Any kind of art that's made that's not for commercial purposes is, I think, not just important but inevitable. That's how people ... I think in the way things are it's kind of set up to be like, First you're making your little books and your little zines with your friends, and then eventually you're accumulating certain kinds of social capital and networking and experience, and you have your CV, and you make a real thing. But Torey Peters is a friend of mine, and she's a person who, because a big publisher wasn't going to publish her book, she was self-publishing. *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* I think was self-published. She was like, Well, they're not going to do it for me, so I'll figure it out and do it myself. And I've always really admired that instinct in any artist. It's not regardless of audience, but it's regardless of the potential for reception or the potential for compensation. Especially as a working artist, you've got to get paid. But doing it for the love of the game is kind of the whole point.

Graham: Did that book *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* have a big impact on you?

Davis: I didn't read that one until a little bit later. The impact that Torey has had on me was more once we met and became friends. I think she's an incredible writer. I love her work. I actually went and saw her read a couple weeks ago. There was a Trans Futures conference at Columbia.

Graham: I missed it. I was really mad. It looked good.

Davis: We went to one of the events, and they were kicking people out. It was packed.

Graham: Which one?

Davis: That one was Trans Narratives with Jackie Ess.

Graham: Yep. Wanted to go to that. So, sorry, tell me about the one that you were mentioning.

Davis: Well, the keynote was Torey's, so she read from her new book, which is about lumberjacks. And it's incredible, and I love it so much. And then she had a conversation with Jules Gill-Peterson, who's brilliant.

Graham: Great trans historian.

Davis: Oh yeah. Have you read *A Short History of Transmisogyny* yet?

Graham: No.

Davis: It's really good. And what she does with it—and I read almost everything that Jules writes... I won't get into it, sorry.

Graham: No, definitely. We can do a little detour.

Davis: Well, I'll just say, back to Torey, when I moved to New York, she reached out and was like, Let's get coffee. And I was like, Wow, *the* Torey Peters. And I show up, and she's riding a pink motorcycle and she's all blonde and glamorous with her pink motorcycle. And I was so intimidated. I was like, Oh my god. But she's actually the nicest and most approachable person. And I've learned a lot from reading her work—you know, in terms of craft. But also having a relationship with an only *slightly* older writer—I mean, it's not a mentorship—but I've just learned a lot from her and her experiences I guess.

Graham: You've named Jackie Ess and Torey Peters as trans authors who've laid a lot of groundwork for more and more trans writers to be publishing today. I'm curious, when did you start interacting with a category we might call trans lit?

Davis: I don't know, because I think the category of trans lit is very much ... I guess that would be post-*Nevada*. I did read *Nevada* shortly after I moved here and was really blown away by it, but I didn't read it when it came out. I'm trying to think of ... I guess it would be contemporaneous with trans lit itself. I was reading trans authors beforehand, but there were not as many, not as many that I knew about, or perhaps people who had written a lot and then

transitioned and written later. The first person that comes to mind would be Patrick Califia, because he was also a Bay Area person for a long time, I believe. Now I feel on the spot. I feel like I'm missing something.

Graham: We can come back to it.

Davis: Sure, what's the next one?

Graham: Well, you mentioned earlier that you stopped doing sex work around the time that you moved—is that right?

Davis: No, it was a little bit before.

Graham: Okay. Do you want to say anything about your experiences doing that or your decision to stop?

Davis: Well, sure. I should say that I started doing it to pay rent and that there was a period of two or three years where it was my job—my main job—and I stopped doing it mostly because of pressure from my partner at the time, who is not a good person. But also because I was in the process of building a straight career—I'm now a copywriter—and sex work was why I was able to get to the point where I could have this straight job. It's something that I've done here and there since then, as it comes up. A good friend of mine who I met when I started doing sex work was like, Well, it's something that you can always come back to. That's the point, right? It's like an anti-job. And it's also a catchall job and the thing you do or you can do when there aren't other options or when you're a little bit tight. But it's also really depressing and disturbing to me to see how much more difficult it's become. I mean, I can't even imagine ... and not just because of the laws changing or other kinds of political repression or the economy getting worse or austerity getting intense or Covid, it's also because of the way that the market works. It's much more difficult to be anonymous. You have to have a social media presence, at least if you're doing it in a certain kind of way. It's a very diverse way to make money, and transactional sex can also not be about money. It can be about shelter or food or whatever. Yes, it's always there, but it's disturbing to me that the barrier to a safer entry, the threshold is always getting higher unfortunately.

Graham: We started this conversation talking about X and wove through a few different topics. But maybe we can go back for a moment. For listeners who haven't had the chance to read that, could you just describe that book for us?

Davis: Sure, the elevator pitch for *X* is it's about a femdom nightmare. This person named Lee is living in New York. They're a lifestyle sadist and top, but they have a bad breakup, their life is kind of falling apart, they're crashing on their friend's couch, and they have this encounter with this stranger named X who they've never seen before at a warehouse. Basically, they get flipped, and then she disappears and they're trying to find her. So she's like the femme fatale who kind of comes in and, in the classic noir, the main character's life gets thrown into disarray. And there's this problematic femme fatale figure, and she's so alluring but she's also posing a lot of problems, may not be trustworthy, may not be real. So in *X*, Lee is trying to find her before ... The other piece to know is that the United States has started incentivizing people to export from the country, to exile themselves from the United States—you know, various kinds of undesirables. So Lee knows that X is leaving, and they only have a very limited amount of time to find her.

Graham: Thank you. When I was re-reading in *X* in preparation for this, I was struck in particular by the moments where Lee returns to certain childhood memories, particularly this scene where they are remembering their childhood hardware store fantasy, which just involves them walking around a hardware store and looking at everything—looking at the hammers and the nails and the bungee cords and the saws and other objects. I think that readers could interpret this as a moment where this character is curious about something that will later maybe evolve into an interest in BDSM and stuff like that, or you could think about it more broadly as an early experience of the erotic or of sexuality related to objects. Not many writers write about sexuality in terms of a body's relationship to an object. Is that something you were particularly interested in doing?

Davis: That's interesting.

Graham: Objectumsexual...

Davis: Do you remember the objectum sexual documentary?

Graham: I haven't seen that.

Davis: It's older. It's probably ten or fifteen years old. I would imagine at this point it's fairly stigmatizing, kind of akin to something like ... Do you remember *Intervention*?

Graham: [shakes head]

Davis: *Intervention* was an AE show that followed people who were getting an intervention because of their addiction.

Graham: Oh, right, right.

Davis: Like *My Strange Addiction*, “these people are freaks.” I’m really moved by the objectum sexual people, but that wasn’t really ... Actually, when I wrote that scene I was thinking about a poem by Bob Flanagan. Do you know Bob Flanagan?

Graham: Mhm. Which poem?

Davis: I think it’s the one ... I can’t remember what it’s called, but it’s like, “Why am I like this?” He’s listing all the reasons why he has become masochistic—some of it’s tongue-in-cheek, and some of it’s real, and some of it’s not. It’s like, “because I’m Catholic, because—” [from “Why” by Bob Flanagan]

Graham: I think I’ve come across this, actually.

Davis: So I think it was less about a sensual relationship between a person and a thing, although I think that is ... I would say not the first or primary but one of the main definitions of a fetish that I think most people think of, like a fetishized object. That’s why it’s a paraphilia, because the correct sexualized object would be another person of the opposite sex or whatever. But more interested in this ... *X*, the book, is really preoccupied with, I guess, nature versus nurture, which I think is not a real binary to actually be thinking about but I think is one that is presented to a lot of us as our destinies. Why you are what you are—was it in your genes or was it because your mom was weird? I think the answer is a little bit more complicated than that, but it’s nice to sometimes just eliminate those and just think about ... I was going to say, I don’t think there are a lot of instances throughout *X* where Lee is, like, calm. But there actually is, and it’s because they are either alone with an erotic object or they have depersonalized another person so that they can be alone. I don’t know if that answered your question.

Graham: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Another thing that comes up in *X* is this sort of in-joke about Dennis Cooper. I was curious why you’re drawn to Cooper’s work. He’s a writer from Pasadena, and you’re also from California, if I’m not wrong.

Davis: Yes, but I’m from Northern California. Have you read his ... Diarmuid Hester wrote his biography [*Wrong: A Critical Biography of Dennis Cooper*], and then his newest book, *I Wished*, did you read it?

Graham: I've read excerpts, yeah.

Davis: I love Dennis Cooper, and *I Wished*, I just balled my way through it. Some parts of it are about his childhood in Pasadena, and just from what he's written it's safe to say we had really different backgrounds. But I think his pursuit of understanding desire as something that can encompass everything, all different kinds of affects, including violence, I think is very interesting and beautiful and meaningful. And also his commitment to ... I guess, *I Wished* put a lot of his work around the George Miles cycle or the beautiful sexy twink I have to defile, it lent it a different kind of gravity and seriousness because you learn a little bit more about, you know, an erotic or sexual obsession or muse, they also can come with a lot of grief. And there's also no quitting it—it quits you. And you might have to live with that for your entire life, and I think in a way that's part of what *I Wished* is about. Anyway, Cooper's work is just fearlessly about the complexity of wanting things and loving people, and it's often hideous—or it can be hideous. I think he's wonderful.

Graham: Yeah. I was rereading the *Paris Review* interview that he did this morning, and there was this moment where he's talking about discovering Sade at, like, age fifteen. He had had this sort of obsession with crimes, particularly crimes to do with extreme sexual violence, and how it made him feel, like, sick or really alienated from other people, and it wasn't until he discovered Sade that he said that he felt—I wrote this down—he said, "I realized that fiction was a place I could release and formulate and try to represent that part of me, that what I had thought was some horrible aspect of me that would isolate me from the world was in fact legitimate and even an important subject matter for literature." I feel like that gets at what you're talking about a little bit. I know that you've also in the past talked about your own interest in things like true crime podcasts. Does his sort of experience around this resonate with you?

Davis: Yeah, I mean, it does. Although I don't like gore. I don't like violence. Which seems kind of disingenuous, but I think some people kind of immerse themselves in that kind of obsession. My immersion was just trying to keep it at bay and try to ignore and try to pretend like it's not happening, which was why *X* was so interesting to write, because I'm not sadistic at all. It freaks me out. I do think sadists are really sexy. So I had to adopt a personality that is very much not mine. And I've said it before, but *X* is kind of my love letter to the sadistic personality, and *Lee* is, like, samples of all these different people I know and I've met and people who I know that are ... Not all of them are good people, but many of them are looked at in kind of a mainstream way and their interests and desires or affinities are totally flattened. But to me, there's so much life there—and also something that can and should be elevated on this literary level, like

Cooper was saying. Not because there's something inherently better or special about them, but because the tendency to dismiss everything we see as bad or disgusting or scary is so flattening, of everything. And you lose so much by trying to hide from or ignore that stuff, even though it's what I try to do in my day-to-day life. Like, ugh, don't think about it. But yeah.

Graham: So can you just say a little bit about your interest in crime novels or noir...

Davis: The noir thing, actually I'm not even really ... The funny thing about noir is, I've read some of the classics. They're all really good. They're also really perverted. Like, I think one of the big inspirations or undercurrents of *X* was *Mildred Pierce*, the film. And I went and read the book. The book is also wonderful, like the movie. But the movie cuts out a lot of twisted incest and stuff like that—gay incest, in fact—and I was like, Oh this is so interesting. Genre is such an interesting way ... And I'd never been a genre writer and not really a very big genre reader, but the noir voice is something that I think a lot of us can drop into really easily because once you start going and looking around, you're like, Oh I know this gumshoe. I know this person. I know this Humphrey Bogart character. I know this ... Not the new *Scarface* from De Palma but the old *Scarface* from the thirties. This kind of sensibility is almost universal but also really easy to twist around and make into your own thing, and it's also really hospitable to an exploration of underworlds and subcultures, darker affects. The true crime thing was just ... It's not even a guilty pleasure of mine anymore. I don't enjoy it. But I definitely went through a period, especially when it was really popular, where I listened to some true crime podcasts. And because noir is so often about a detective or a cop, policing, someone breaking the law, subcultures and undergrounds, that you're like, Oh these can be really easily transposed. And then I can use this genre that I'm going to be using for this book to get on my soapbox about true crime, which is evil. Or rather, the instinct to turn the suffering of individual people in really bad situations and the carceral system into a spectacle. So it really lent itself to that. Yeah, that was something that ... I got interviewed on NPR, and you know, they cut stuff. Of course, they're going to cut. I'm not media trained. I say "um" a lot. But I talked a lot about prison abolition, and they cut all of it. I was like, Come on. Because people were like, Ooh true crime. I was like, True crime because cops are bad. But we never want to get to that point. I was like, Aw man. I wish that was more of a takeaway for people.

Graham: Is that something you were thinking about a lot as you were writing *X*?

Davis: Yeah, just because the structure of *X* is that for the purposes of national hygiene we must eliminate or remove or surveil this kind of person, and as queer people we do or we should recognize the danger that poses, even as a white citizen. And that danger gets magnified for other kinds of people. But also, you can't decide what resonates with people with anything,

with any work of art. But then it wouldn't be art, because they would just be my little puppet people responding to me the way I want them to, so I can't make them do that.

Graham: So I mentioned Cooper's interest in Sade and French literature and stuff, and I read somewhere that you also read Genet and writers like that. Do you want to talk a little bit about your interest in that and what that does for you?

Davis: Yeah, I have not read much Sade. I have not been able to watch all of *Salò*. I don't have the stomach ... It's difficult for me. I mean, you said French, but I read some Pasolini. And yeah, you know when you read someone who's in the canon and you're like, How come no one told me? But everyone told you. You just got to it late. Which is how I felt about Jean Genet. I was like, Wow. Everyone that I knew was like, You're going to love this. And I was like, You're right, it's incredible! So beautiful. And of course, I'm sure if we're doing a survey of deviant French literature, there's going to be Marquis de Sade, there's going to be Jean Genet, but I think what is so exciting to me about Genet's work is he identifies abjection and deviance as the entrypoint to connection and eventually to solidarity, right? He began his life in poverty. He was institutionalized in various ways. He was imprisoned as an adult. And from these experiences became an anti-imperialist, an antiracist. And I know he was not unproblematic—nobody is, I guess—but being able to take something, like this degradation, and not find dignity and mutual humanity *despite* it but *through* it, I just was blown away by that. And still am.

Graham: Which of his books have been the most transformative for you?

Davis: I guess the most recent one that I read was *Thief's Journal*, and I believe—although I'm not sure because I'm not a Genet expert—but I believe that is the most autobiographical of his. But also, in preparation for my new book I was reading a lot of twentieth century gay male autofiction, and so in that case you have to read Genet. I think, also, his relationship between his self and the fictionalized self on the page is very interesting.

Graham: When we were talking a little bit earlier about Cooper I mentioned that he was from Pasadena and you mentioned that you're from Northern California, so it wasn't an exact match. But I am curious if literary movements that grew in that region had an impact on you. For example, were you interested in New Narrative when you were beginning your writing?

Davis: Is that, like ... ?

Graham: Bay Area.

Davis: The thing is, I'm from further north. I lived in the Bay for, like, ten years, and I wasn't really involved—a little bit toward the end—but I wasn't really involved in a literary scene. I was working and freaking out. I was not, like ... I wish I could go back in time and change what I was up to, but the things that I was, even though I was in school, working with and exposed to was really just not very systematic, not very thoughtful. I was just vibing.

Graham: Do you want to say why you were freaking out? What were you up to?

Davis: I was, like, very in denial about transitioning. And I have health problems. I was really sick, and really poor. The fact that I wrote my first book at all is kind of a surprise for me, but I was able to write it because I got kind of my first desk job—a fuck-off mail job. Before then, it was all various kinds of, I guess, manual labor, including sex work. So yeah, like I said, no thinking until I turned thirty.

Graham: Where exactly in Northern California?

Davis: Do you know California?

Graham: I went to school there.

Davis: Where'd you go?

Graham: I went to a liberal arts school called Pomona College.

Davis: Oh, Pomona. I am from Chico, California, which is up at the top, kind of. Raymond Carver lived there, famously. That's kind of all we've got, though.

Graham: Okay yeah, I'm from Washington state, so Carver is big there too.

Davis: Yeah, he's great. He's fabulous—speaking of short stories writers.

Graham: I love *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. So good.

Davis: And I didn't know this, but the branch of my public library that I went to with my little sisters was the Ray Carver public library.

Graham: Oh whoa, cool.

Davis: Otherwise there's not a whole lot going on up there.

Graham: What was Chico like? What was growing up there like?

Davis: Well, it's a small college town. And it's, I would say, lots of hippie, crunchy types. And then lots of rednecks. Which is kind of actually a good way to describe my family, because my mom came from a nice middle class family in Long Beach and my dad came from a working poor family in a very small town also in Northern California. So yeah, Chico. It's fine, I guess. I would never want to live there. Climate change is making it harder to live there, because of the heat and the virus. But it's also very beautiful. I miss it a lot. I have two partners and one of them, she's a couple years older than me, and then one of them, he's nine years younger than me, and he's also trans. And he started transitioning as a teenager, which, I didn't even know trans people existed until I went to college. Of course there was this specter of a bad gender, or a scary kind of trans woman. But I didn't meet a transsexual that I knew of until I was nineteen years old. And I think a lot of people my age and older have that experience of just not really knowing. I didn't even know that people ... What am I trying to say? I think it was kind of like the way I tried to not know about violence. I was trying to not know about lots of stuff growing up, mostly just blocking everything out, I guess.

Graham: You said that it wasn't until college that you first started meeting trans people. What changed when you started?

Davis: My first years of college I don't remember very well because I was very depressed and suicidal. But one of the few things that I can remember is meeting a trans guy. At the time, I was like, What? I didn't catch their name, so I don't even know what gender they were. But I was like, What is this person? I couldn't tell what they were. I couldn't stop staring at them. Everything around me was a cloud, just totally dark. And then this person. I was looking at their face, looking at their hands and their clothes. And I didn't even know what I was seeing. I'm narrativizing it a little bit, but it felt like the first time I really saw something. So it was a slow process to go from that to eventually doing it myself.

Graham: Yeah, how did you get from the point where you were growing up, as an adolescent feeling like you were avoiding a lot of thoughts and a lot of things about yourself, to the point where you started becoming interested in transitioning in a medical way or a social way?

Davis: Once I became aware that it was an option, I became gravitating toward that direction. But I didn't feel male. You know, I think probably the vast majority of trans people are like, Well, I don't fit into the normal ... whatever. So I did try initially to transition probably when I

was twenty-two, but I was having sex with men, I was feminine, or whatever. So I got told, No. Some people go another route and they do it themselves.

Graham: You mean a doctor refused—

Davis: Yeah, I was trying to get surgery and they were like, Ooh, you don't want to do that. But you know, I just decided to pretend like none of that happened. So I kept trying to pretend like I was cis, or cissexual or whatever. And I was working at the time too, so the idea of transitioning while working as a girl, people do it all the time but I didn't feel that that was an option for me. And in the sense that it would have made it a lot more difficult, that's kind of true, I guess. Yeah, uh, therapy. Lots of therapy. Also, I did a lot of work to avoid trans people, but once I actually started finding trans people, especially—I met the right doll at the right time.

Graham: Was that Torey Peters?

Davis: No, actually.

Graham: Who was it?

Davis: You know, she and I don't talk anymore. But just a girl I met at The Stud, actually. She was the first person to be like, You know what? You should do it. You would look good, and I think it would feel good. And no one had ever said that to me before, even very supportive friends who are cis. No one had ever been like, You know what? It might be a good thing. And that was really all it took for me.

Graham: How did you come into your queer and trans community? I've read somewhere that you've said there's a difference between coming into your identity or your sense of yourself as a queer or trans person and then there's another thing, which is having relationships or having a sense of community or collectivity with other queer and trans people. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Davis: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't have a queer community if I hadn't been ... I was out, and I knew other gay people. But I don't think I would have had the community that I needed if I hadn't been a prostitute. And that's leather, like, that got me into leather, which is what got me actually linked up to other queer people kind of in my class position but also very different from me for a variety of reasons. So leather was the entrypoint for me. And yeah, when you're new, especially when you don't know any other gay people, all you have to go on is your sense of self or your suspicions about yourself—and also probably how other people identify you, which was

... I've always looked a little off. I've always been gender nonconforming, and that was always something that colored how I experienced the world. So community gives that meaning and structure and safety and also teaches you manners and accountability and responsibility, and gives you a reason to be good to people around you. And that's a learning curve. And even if you are gay, feel gay, have looked gay your whole life, coming into community is how you shed the ways that we are all inculcated or ingrained to prioritize straightness and prioritize cisness and prioritize all of those things that make a community unhealthy. So usually, if I'm talking about that I'm ranting about how there is a difference. Or that, becoming a queer person is a process, and it is inseparable from the community of queer people you have around you.

Graham: So you mentioned how important finding people in the leather scene was to this process for you, did you start getting into that in New York?

Davis: No.

Graham: Berkeley?

Davis: Yeah, my first job when I was doing sex work was in a dungeon, which isn't to say ... Transactional sex is not a community, but the people who provide it often are in community with each other. And I have always had certain tendencies, but I didn't have a language for them or a history for them or an awareness of it as being part of subculture until I became a sex worker. And then I was like, Oh, there's a whole thing here. Then you read more about it, and you meet people, and you learn more, and you realize that, you know, if we're talking about things like—it's been run into the ground—but kink at Pride type discourse or questions about whether and how much a certain kind of sexual subculture is acceptable in a broader queer coalition, the fact of the matter is it's foundational to it. You don't have a gay rights movement without street queens and people who live outside and workers and perverts. It's just all one in the same.

Graham: So you've lived in New York for a while now, maybe five years? We just talked about what queer community in Berkeley meant to you. What about here in New York? What have your experiences been with queer and trans spaces here? What's living here been like for you for the past five years?

Davis: I love it here. It's great here.

Graham: Not to make an ad for New York, but...

Davis: No, it's great. How long have you lived here?

Graham: Five years. I think I probably moved here about the same time you did.

Davis: Like 2019?

Graham: Mhm, I moved here in June of 2019.

Davis: Oh okay, because I moved here in January of that year, and I got the last year of pre-Covid New York. God, so then you must have been here six months...

Graham: Yeah, I was here for, like, six months, and then the pandemic happened.

Davis: Ooh. That's crazy. Oh my god, yeah.

Graham: But then also, didn't that—moving and starting to write *X* and then the pandemic happening not so long after ... and were you starting *T* at the same time? Was that all happening at the same time?

Davis: Kind of, yeah.

Graham: What was that like?

Davis: Uh, stressful.

Graham: I bet.

Davis: Also, that same year, I also got ... I'd had a top surgery out west, and it was botched. So I had to redo it, which was very depressing and a very terrible experience. So it kind of condensed, the medical transition part. It all kind of was happening at the same time. So it was a little bit intense. But also I was writing *X* when I was a little bit manic, in a manic period I guess, so it came out really fast.

Graham: How long did it take to write?

Davis: Like seven months.

Graham: Yeah ... That's fast.

Davis: I usually don't work that fast. But I just was, like, very energized I guess. And it lends to, I think, the frenetic pacing of the book. I read reviews and people are like, This is so stressful, and it's a lot going on, and it's very overwhelming. And I'm like, That's the craft. But it's also just how my brain was.

Graham: And you're working on a new book right now. You mentioned a while ago reading twentieth century gay, mostly cis writers in preparation for this new book, which I think is still titled *Casanova 20: Or Hot Worlds?* And you've described it as your "first heterosexual novel." Can you say more about that?

Davis: So *Casanova 20* was born ... I'm a big fan of the Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni, this mid-century commedia dell'arte Italian actor—a lot of comedies, a lot of dramas. But he's in this film that's more of a comedy, and it's called *Casanova 70*, and he plays this man who's kind of a bumbling man and he can't get hard unless he's in danger. So it's just him with these women, and he's romancing them but he's trying to get them into a dangerous situation so he can make it happen. So he's like, What if we did it on the roof? Oh no your husband's in the next room! And it's so silly and outrageous, but I'm so captivated by people whose sexual life is dangerous, for probably obvious reasons. At the same time I was thinking a lot about how much resentment I had about being a trans writer. And everything becomes about being trans, and it's very reductive and often very boring. It's a part of the marketing, and how frustrating it can be for a readership who only sees that. So I was like, Okay, what if I just wrote a book with no trans people? I did not succeed in writing a book with no gay people, because there is a prominent gay character in *Casanova 20*. But it's two characters. One of them is an older white male artist, which is why I was reading all of that autofiction about white cis gay men—to kind of familiarize myself—and then the other character is a young white straight man who is very beautiful, and that makes people behave weird, and so that makes all of his sexual encounters have this level of risk and in their relationship. I don't have a good elevator pitch for it yet.

Graham: It's okay. I think we've mentioned Jackie Ess's name a couple of times now. She's another writer who talks a lot about the ways in which books by trans authors are often flattened into, if not the autofictional, even the autobiographical or the confessional. And she plays with that a lot. I'm curious if reading *Darryl*, which is a book that very much stands out to me as a book that cannot be collapsed in that way, did that have an influence on you at all?

Davis: Yeah. I wish we'd been able to go to that Trans Narrative thing. But beyond that topic, because *Darryl* is so funny and so original and the ways in which it's philosophical, it's not even really a refusal to play into narratives around trans books and the trans authors who write them, but in a way she kind of side steps it completely. So yeah, post-*Darryl*, if you've

encountered *Darryl*, you can't talk about or write about these things without thinking about Jackie Ess being one of the desistors, I guess, of that. Which isn't to say ... If we're talking about Jackie and we're also talking about Torey, a person who really intentionally decided to write the bourgeois womens' novel with trans women, that's another way of doing it. But I think a lot of us, regardless of how we're positioning ourselves, as trans writers, that feeling of suffocation—we can all relate to that. And the degree to which you can play with it and the degree to which you can opt out of it are all really reliant on whatever else you're bringing to the table. So I was really tempted to be like, I'm just throwing this away, I'm not touching it, I don't want to have to deal with it. That's not possible. And also the desire to, like, rise above it is symptomatic of a certain kind of ... Like, I can do that more because I'm white. And I can do that more because I'm not a doll. So that was in the process for me as I was developing this new novel—my instinct and then pushing back against it and trying to examine where that's coming from.

Graham: Yeah, that makes sense. What is your relationship to your transness now?

Davis: That's a good question. Being a dyke saved my life, and it was very important to me for a long time. And lately I've been really kind of wanting to ... I've been feeling like I disidentify with anything other than *trans*, or anything other than *gay*. *Gay* means when we talk about the old term of *gay*, which was just for every LGBTQ person, and it wasn't so long ago that trans people were not necessarily distinguished from cis queer people or the ways in which they were distinguished were different. I'm not going to say that trade is in community, but the way that straight people are enmeshed in different queer communities because we're sleeping with them or because they're paying us for sex or whatever ... To me at least, my relationship to my transness now, I feel mostly pretty alienated by dyke or fag or the things that work for cis people. And I meet a lot of people like this. Like, the older they get, they're like, I'm not really anything—that whole identitarian stuff does not serve me anymore, or feels suffocating.

Graham: Do you also feel that way?

Davis: Yeah... And if I think about it, the ways in which I organize my life and the ways in which I'm in community with people, I'm in community with dykes and I'm in community with fags but it just makes the most sense ... It's hard to not be reactive, so all the time I'm trying to moderate my sense of self with this other reactionary push that's like, I'm not that, I'm not that, because I feel often so alienated from cis people. So I guess there isn't really an answer. The older I get, the more I'm like, I'm just gay. I don't know.

Graham: Okay, cool. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about?

Davis: I don't think so. I didn't think that your questions were going to be so well-informed.

Graham: Well, thank you, I guess?

Davis: Not what I was expecting. I didn't know what to expect.

Graham: No, totally. Well, thank you so much for your time. Maybe we can end here.

Davis: Amazing. Thank you so much. It was nice.