NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

NAOMI CLARK

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Micah Katz (volunteer)

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Michelle O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Naomi Clark 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 March 3rd, 2017 and this is being recorded at NYU [New York University] MetroTech.

Naomi Clark: Hi

O'Brien: Tell me about your growing up.

Clark: I grew up primarily in Seattle, Washington on the West Coast, although I was in—born in Southern California, which is where my parents met while they were both studying at, uh—at UCLA. And then I spent the first couple years of my life after that in—in London, where my—my father was doing post-doctoral research in Immunology. My sister was born there. But then, not long after that, we moved to Seattle and that's sort of where a lot of my first memories and childhood memories begin. So yeah during my childhood my dad was working at the University of Washington. My mom was working as a social worker and also taking care of me and my sister. We went to public school, lived in, mostly in Capitol Hill, which was at the time, sort of becoming a burgeoning gay neighborhood of Seattle, and yeah—and then that's, yeah I think—yeah that's like I guess—is the backdrop [laughter].

O'Brien: Tell me an early memory you have.

Clark: Hmm...gosh I have so...I have sort of like a—just like a flood of random impressions. Um, is there anything in particular that...like a subject?

O'Brien: How about Capitol Hill?

Clark: Oh, about Capitol Hill, so we—we lived right near, a big park that's on the top of Capitol Hill, Volunteer Park, and that was the neighborhood that I sort of first learned to navigate as a child. Like I sort of got an impression of where things were: you know, where was the nearest candy store and then like where was the slightly bigger drug store that I can get to if you walked a little further. And the path that I walked on the most was along the edge of that park, heading towards the, hospital, that's—that's still up there today on, 15th street and, along the way there was a, uh—a used book store that was in just like a little cottage, along the—the north side of—of 15th street and it was my habit to sort of walk there when I was, I don't know, from the—from the age of 6 or 7 up—up to you know 10 or 11, uh 12 years old. I would just kind of walk over to the bookstore and just sort of [laughter] use it as a reading library. They had a lot of, old, sci-fi and fantasy books, especially from the 60's and 70's and I would kind of sit on a milk crate and just like read through books. I guess the—in like this—the old guy who worked in that bookstore tolerated my presence. I was obviously like a nerdy, bookish little kid and so I would just sort of sit there with the bookstore cat and read for hours and then I would walk back home and so I sort of knew that—that pathway really well.
O’Brien: How did your family get along?

Clark: My family got along pretty well. My—my parents had—had fights at times and they eventually ended up getting divorced. I was maybe 13 or 14, which didn't come as a huge surprise to me because they were—there were all these times when they didn't get along. My—my mother is Japanese, and my dad is of many generations-old American stock, mostly, English and—and Irish, although my Grandmother on that side is—is Welsh and was also sort of an immigrant who came to the U.S. as a—as a World War II bride. And my mom always had a little bit of—of trouble dealing with the expectations of American culture, especially when it came to how she felt, like, as a woman in the United States, she was supposed to be emotionally demonstrative or—or warm in certain ways that she sort of chafed against and yeah and so at times my—my dad or—and my dad's family and—and some of, their peers felt like she was a little bit unemotional or cold or sort of, you know, not interested in doing a lot of the emotional labor that—that maybe is expected of a American wife and mother so that—that was something that they conflicts about. I remember them also fighting a lot about um...where—where one of them had—had left the scissors or a household object and things being out of place and so that was kind of a weird, recurring source of tension when I was a kid but they did really try to prioritize making sure that my sister and I were well taken care of and we knew that we were loved and so I—I feel like I—I grew up in a pretty supportive, loving household other than those tensions. And the other thing that really stands out, she, not—not too long before they got divorced, um was that my—my aunt, my father's youngest sister, was diagnosed with HIV and there—and that was sort of a huge family crisis and my—my aunt and my grandmother, for that reason sort of moved up to the Seattle area because my dad who was working in, immunology and microbiology at the University of Washington, was sort of able to persuade my aunt to apply to be in some clinical trials for—for AZT, which was at that time an experimental drug and um...and so yeah he sort of used his connections and persuaded her that she should try this drug to sort of prevent, HIV from crossing the—the uterine threshold because, she was also pregnant, at the same time, with, uh—yeah with a child with of course herself and, her partner, who she had um—who she had—also was HIV-positive and sort of transmitted the virus to her, so...

O’Brien: That's a very effective use of AZT

Clark: Yeah and it turned out that that was part of what, um—that was the clinical trial that demonstrated like, “Oh, it's effective for that,” and so my—my cousin who was born around that time, was not HIV-positive due to that early use of HI—of—of AZT and, but it also—it placed a certain amount of strain on my family I think, and it wasn't all totally clear to me at that age but there—yeah there was a lot of upset and crying, and stress, that, uh—yeah my—my father feeling like my mother wasn't as supportive as she could have been of everything that was going on and, yeah so my parents ended up getting divorced a couple years later, and that was also, a few years after we—we went to live in Japan for a year too so that was, like a major landmark in my childhood. I guess I—you know now that I look back, that was kind of on the road to like my parents trying to figure out how to resolve their—their marital difficulties. My mom felt like she had had to sacrifice a lot of her own career ambitions
because my—my dad had this professor position that was sort of taking up most of his time between research and teaching and she had a slightly more flexible job, doing translations of, works by Japanese women authors and other, um—and some feminist sociology from Japan and also working as a social worker at a, Japanese retirement home in Seattle and, because she had the sort of more flexible schedule and the—some years was working, out of the home, but a lot was working at home, she—like the burden of, childcare really fell on her and so she—she really felt like she had had to make a lot of sacrifices to sort of fall into that typical role of the—of the woman who stays at home to raise the kids, which was like never in her conception of what she wanted to be when she was sort of growing up. She—she was one of the first graduates of the—the first women's college in Japan, which kind of opened up after the war because she was a—she was a kid, in World War II when—when like Tokyo was being bombed and um... so yeah it wasn't her idea of like what her life would turn out to be and so we went back to Japan for a year so that she could do research there and my—my dad had a, visiting professor position at Osaka University and we—we lived there and that was like a—a huge, momentous event in, the lives of me and my sister because we were suddenly sort of plucked out of our, you know, familiar environments of friends and, kids at school that we knew and—and we went to Japan. We didn't—we barely spoke any Japanese. We had done some Saturday school lessons in Japanese but it was kind of like barely conversant at all. So, we were just stuck in Japanese public school, um where nobody spoke any English at all and we kind of just had to learn how to speak English. I think I was 11 years old at the time. Uh so that was like a big—a big culture shock and also like—just an enormous challenge and was pretty, alienating in a lot of ways and isolating, but, yeah I—I don't know, I—I guess I like to think it—it made me sort of resilient in some ways and certainly really changed the kinds of, culture, both pop culture and traditional culture that I was exposed to and, you know, really was maybe the first time I was like “Oh I have this—this whole other huge side to my heritage that's not just the—the food that my mom makes and you know, like, my grandmother visiting occasionally,” which, uh—which she would from Japan. So yeah that was a, yeah, pretty momentous time. That was all sort of within the space of a few years that we went to Japan and my—then my aunt was—was diagnosed with HIV...

O'Brien: What year—

Clark: And my parents...

O'Brien: was that?

Clark: That, would've been—it was 1987 when we went to Japan. Uh, it was probably around...it was...90...1988 or '89 when my...aunt was diagnosed with HIV and it was 1989 or 1990 when my parents got divorced I think. I might be remembering wrong.

O'Brien: Tell me about some of the Japanese culture that had an influence on you.

Clark: Well probably as a 11 and then 12 year old in Japan, the things that had the biggest influence on me were, television, specifically, like animated shows on TV that I watched when
I was over there and, candy [laughter]. It’s these things that, uh—that, five years later were also really popular in the United States.

O’Brien: [laughter]

Clark: I sort of came back knowing about all this stuff and then like, you know, started to get popular here, so I was you know watching cartoon shows like, Dragon Ball that got—that got popular here in the United States in the—in the 90s but I was sort of really into that stuff in the...you know as a 11 or 12 year old in the 80s, and yeah definitely Japanese comic books and yeah the types of candy that they had there. A lot of—lot of Japanese food, I sort of really came to—to love and feel a strong connection to in that period as well and, um yeah and then a little—yeah, to some extent, Japanese video games because the, the Nintendo console system had not come out in the United States when I had left to go to Japan and it was relatively new in Japan while I was in Japan. The Super—the Super Nintendo, which over there is called a—a Famicom, the Super Famicom were both released and so like all of the kids I knew at school were totally wild for that and we—we weren’t allowed to have one. I think my—you know my parents were not real big on comic books or video games and that kind of thing, but I spent a lot of time at friends’ houses, you know playing Legend of Zelda and stuff like that so...and then I, you know—I came back to the U.S. and I was like, “Oh my gosh, I have to tell you guys about this” [laughter] you know after a year and, nobody knew what I was talking about but then like, six months later all that sort of like, came out, in the United States as well, so I got to enjoy this, you know, feeling of being in the know or being like, “Oh yeah that’s uh—that’s old. I know about that already.” [laughter] And that was definitely—it was actually in Japanese comic books that I encountered a bunch of trans themes early on, like sort of as an adolescent, which had huge resonance for me because I was aware that I was trans, but I hadn’t really...other—other than reading really horribly dry, scary encyclopedia articles, you know, like I hadn't really encountered, it being talked about. You know and if you read encyclopedia articles there's all this stuff about like, “This is what transvestitism is," right? But, in Japan, there was such a wide variety of—by American standards like, relatively uncensored themes in comics that you would have, like, all of these like magical transformation stories where—where, people's bodies were being transformed, and having like gender changes and things like that and I was like, “Wow this is like, really—really something. It's like someone's like, staring into the recesses of my brain.” So that—that was quite a, like, um—I guess you could say like it made concrete a lot of things that I had been thinking about for a long time to see it sort of like printed on a page and reproduced. It’s like—and these were comics for kids too. I should be pretty clear it’s not like adult comics, but these kinds of things that would be considered too perverted in American comics are like completely—considered completely fine for kids in Japan, so, yeah so there—there was all this stuff about—with adolescent kids switching genders: female to male, male to female, whatever, and it was a little bit mind-blowing for me at 11.

O’Brien: Do you remember specific ones?
Clark: Oh yeah, for sure. Um, the one that really stuck with me and that I demanded help from friends to, like, help—help translate all the words so that I made sure I understood all the slang terms in it was a comic called, um "Magical Taluluto" [also known as Magical Taruruuto-kun] which was, I think translated into French and English later on, but is a relatively obscure comic. It's, a comic about a—I think it's a boy in middle school who somehow acquires like, a weird, little, magical imp-friend, who produces all sorts of strange gadgets. It's kind of derivative of an earlier—of an earlier, comic and cartoon series called Doraemon, which is about a magical cat robot from the future, but in this case it's just a—sort of a, you know little magical—like a cute goblin, who, uh every—every episode or issue, tries to solve the ordinary, like middle school problems of this—of this boy by producing some kind of like, bizarre, magical solution. It's like, "Oh you're too short to be on the basketball team. Well, you know, like, here you have—wrap these magic bandages around your legs and they'll make your legs super, super long and rubbery" or something like that, right? Where it's like a little bit, like—a little bit bizarre and slightly uncanny. And of course there's always some sort of problem that results as—you know, as a result of having like, giant, long, rubbery legs to be on the basketball team, right? So it's this sort of farcical, sitcom style, but one of them was definitely...I—you know, was sort of someone who had lots of sort of sports teams or like, “Oh, like someone has a crush on someone else” sort of Saved by the Bell kind of stuff, but one of them was...I don't—I'm trying to...I—I forget what the rationale was, because I—I didn't read Japanese very well and so I had to get help translating this stuff, but for some reason, I think in order to support a female friend, the idea was—well, this—this like protagonist had to—was like, "I need to turn into a girl somehow" and so drank this magic potion that, like, makes him turn into a girl and, with like, a couple pages of, like, body transformation stuff and things like that and I was like, “Woah, this is—this is like pretty intense and a—like a little bit sexual,” in a way that would be maybe considered PG-13 in the U.S., but also sort of like a, topic area, which like, American printed comics strip, kids very, very rarely would delve into, and then it sort of goes on and then like, you know, other—other people drink the potion and like people are just sort of gender swapping everywhere and so it becomes this—this fucking genderswap fantasia.

O'Brien: Tell me about your teenage years.

Clark: Uh, yeah so as a teenager, I was—I was back in the U.S. and I went to public school in Seattle in the, Central District, which was the sort of the historic African American neighborhood of Seattle. I went to Garfield High School, which was about, roughly like, half African American and half everyone else. It was a actually pretty segregated public school in the sense that there was a gifted program that, involved students being best from around Seattle to sort of take part in this kind of like, a magnet school program or something like that, and the gifted classes were probably something like 80% White, or maybe like 80% White and Asian and um—or more maybe—maybe closer to 90% if you include the Asian kids and um—whereas the non-gifted, classes were—were like majority Black students. So within this school you sort of had two schools, side-by-side, and although there was some social overlap, between the two sides of the school, it was like for the most part, you know people
kind of had their own cliques. There was your friends with people in your classes and stuff. It was, I think, a—a funny kind of like, racially tense environment to be going to school in, when I—when I look back on it and I think about how—how odd that was, but at the same time there was this kind of overall feeling of like “Oh, you know, we go to a really diverse school where we learn about racial justice ideas,” right? So like, everyone in school—in public school in the early ‘90s were, you know, taught ideas like, “Racism is prejudice plus power,” right? That’s sort of like where I was exposed to that idea and I don’t think I realized until later, when I went to college that like, “Oh that’s not what everyone thinks racism is” [laughter]. So it was pretty socially progressive, despite having this, segregated mix and the school was, was known in part—like we had the Jimmy Hendrix Memorial Library and we had the Quincy Jones Auditorio—which they had both gone to that school and so we had this—sort of built on this bedrock of like those, sort of, important Black pioneers of arts and culture in Seattle and, um—and yeah—and that was...I was just thinking about this the other day, because uh—oh I watched that documentary, 13th, by Ava DuVernay, about the prison-industrial complex and was thinking, “Oh yeah it was in high school when two really significant things happened.” Um, that was the first time I saw a childhood friend of mine being thrown up against a police car and handcuffed like out of nowhere for no reason, because our—our school was—was somewhat heavily policed at times, whenever there was like a large gathering of students, even for a sort of ordinary assembly or something like that, the police would be there and if there was anything, you know, if they thought people were getting out of hand or whatever, they would usually—they would you know, grab some Black students—um you know young guys in their teenage years and you know in some cases like arrest him. So...and we had some—we had some like drive by shootings and things like that, but usually after school and we—we had some other problems. That was also the first time that I had a friend who was very out and openly gay and kind of gender nonconforming in the way that he was gay and, I mean and he was beat up by some students from another school, and it was while, you know, none of us—none of the rest of his friends were around and we were all kind of totally devastated and felt like helpless as far as what to do about it, but this was before there was anything like a Gay, uh—Gay Straight Alliance, it was before that era, so...it was...we were pretty clear that, you know the—the administration of the school didn’t approve of gay students. It wasn’t like...yeah it wasn’t treated like a hate crime or like a real—or a cause for concern beyond the level of anyone getting beat up. I think that one administrator made some comments kind of to the effect of like, “Well maybe you shouldn’t dress like that,” “Maybe you shouldn’t be so flamboyant.” We were all incredibly, incredibly mad about that. It was kind of an era where my—my father especially was—was—still had some homophobic views that were kind of acceptable for a liberal in the [Bill] Clinton era, right? Which you know, he was—you know, he was horrified to sort of think back, that that’s what he thought that, like most liberals, but yeah but so that was like a—I—I think it was a lot of arguments in my teenage years about like, “No actually it’s perfectly—it’s perfectly fine for gay people to be able to adopt children” like, you know, “How dare you!?” saying a thing like that and we were protesting the Iraq War, at the time and so that was the first Iraq War under George H. W. Bush, when I was in high school before—before Clinton was elected and, the other thing—oh yeah, the other thing not long after that, was I found another childhood
friend of mine who grew up like four blocks from where I lived was deeply racist and at one point conf—sort of confided in me that he had, like, a lot of anti-Black racism in like, real—pretty disgusting and horrifying ways, because he sort of was kind of trying to feel me out about it and I was like completely shocked and disgusted and was like why—why would you even...why would you even tell me this, like, that's—that's totally wrong, that's not cool for you to say, but I think I was—I was shocked at all three of these things: sort of the homophobic violence, which I kind of knew was out there, but it had kind of intruded so suddenly and sharply, was more shocking to me than having people drive by our school and shoot at it with guns, um because that sort of seemed a little bit like, “Well that just happens sometimes” um [laughter] and then the, and then the police violence against people I had been in classes with since I was like, you know, seven years old, somebody was like, “Oh, now the—the Black guys that I went to school with are perceived as dangerous threats by the police in ways that the rest of us are not” and um—and then, yeah—and then some other people—others of my classmates are like super racist against these same guys and I had just had no idea and I—I had never—that was the first time I, like, really encountered up-close, face-to-face, that kind of racism and I was just like, totally shocked and, uh—and rocked back on my heels and I think it did—it did politicize me in some ways. There was, uh—there wasn't a whole lot of activism in Seattle that I was aware of as a teenager other than teens organizing against the, what was called the “Teen Dance Ordinance,” preventing, underage, um—underage people from going to musical shows, [coughing/laughter] that sort of, felt like it was sort of the local activism that was happening in the Grunge era, but then—yeah, but then I got involved in volunteering for the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and we started an Amnesty International chapter and did a lot of like, high school student letter writing. Um, I think, yeah that was, in part, a result of like, having those kinds of encounters.

O’Brien: So it sounds like you had some queer community of sorts in high school?

Clark: Yeah, I mean there were like a whole lot of queers at my school, but there was only one person who was out, right? Everyone else, it was sort of like, “Oh you think like, maybe this person’s gay?” or like “That girl is probably gay because—” and you know, “Because of the way she dresses or cuts her hair,” but it was never like, really acknowledged even though, you know I have—yeah, I have a high school classmate who I haven’t seen much since, but who transitioned...I have a number of high school classmates if I count people who are above or below me by a couple years. There are probably like five of us in—that range around me who transitioned. Um, I went to school with—with Chris Hayashi, who was also at the same high school at the same time and I was in, um—in high school with—with his younger sister, who was in my class, uh and...but—but there was only—only my one friend was—was really out in a way that was super visible and everyone else was sort of—waited until college, I guess you—you could say, and it was in part because it was just not a positive atmosphere, in part because of...yeah in part because of some of the—the social tensions around the school. Um, in part because we had one gay teacher, who was like, censured and fired on—for being sort of accused of having inappropriate relationships with students, which...pretty sure was like totally, like, made up, right? So it was—it was pretty clear to everyone, like, "Yeah this is
not...you're going to, like, catch shit somehow for it," and so even—even the students who were, yeah who were sort of more visibly gender nonconforming in some way kind of like played it down, right? And weren't—sort of like weren't out and yeah...and that was certainly true of me too. I mean I was, um...I was like, very, very aware of being a trans student and I only confided in, like, a couple of my—my closest friends, when I was in high school, like swore them to secrecy because I was completely convinced that, you know, that my life would be over in some sense if—if I was出了, right? That I would—that I—you know, I wouldn't be able to go to college. I would—might be, like, I don't know, like, I had, kind of anti-fantasies, which were almost certainly not true, but I was really afraid that, you know, maybe somehow I would be sent for reparative therapy or, um—or that I would just be made to feel so ashamed that, like—that I wouldn't know what to do. I would have to like commit suicide out of shame or something like that, but I was a teenager and I was so—it was so intense, a set of feelings that it was like, about as far from any kind of like, rational consideration as you can imagine.

O'Brien: Yeah. When did that start to shift for you?

Clark: Um, not until a number of years later. I came to New York [City], to go to college. I went to Columbia University and by that time I was—I was kind of firmly in a kind of like, “I'm depressed and not really thinking about this." I think at times, I was like, “Oh, maybe the best way to be trans would be to get really good at lucid dreaming," [laughter] and I was really sort of like—I was like, “I'm going to teach myself how to lucid dream, and then, you know, I can basically transition while I'm asleep," [laughter] right? That was like sort of my avoidant way of dealing with it and I was very, very depressed throughout college. Um, had really no relationships—really close relationships of any kind and just kind of like casual, social relationships. Just sort of like, holed up in myself and, I went on to—I—I worked at an online magazine in college and for a number of years and sort of paid for about half of my—my college costs that way, by kind of you know, I sort of partially put myself through school and partially with my—my parents' savings and um—and then sort of kept doing that after school...sorry yeah after school, sort of worked at that magazine fulltime and then that magazine kind of folded in one of the early, like, Internet crashes, when a lot of companies sort of folded up or went bankrupt and then I went to work for Lego which was—the toy company, which had opened, offices here in New York and it was during that period that two things happened: one was the—the September 11th, 2001 attack, which was not far from where I was working. It was about—like I worked about a mile north of the World Trade Center and the second was that I had a bunch of queer coworkers, at Lego because at the time, people sort of working in creative fields on the Internet were a collection of kind of art and design weirdos from around New York and there were a lot of—of young people who had some technical skills or who had, you know, done a little web design and a lot—and a lot of queer people and so I—I had some queer friends, they were all women, at Lego and I was kind of in a department that was sort of mostly women handling website stuff, eh, it was maybe like 60-40 and the—yeah and so I—I had queer friends for the first time and then September 11th stuff happened and that was extremely galvanizing for me. I was like, “Oh ok, I have to
kind of stop being miserable about being trans and stop just sort of like occasionally confiding in one person,” um and it was actually—yeah, one of my—my close friends, my coworkers, uh who—yeah, who was gay and who—but who like she and I got kind of involved in a way that was...yeah we were like both cheating on our primary partners at work, in this sort of post-September 11th weirdness where like everyone was kind of traumatized and freaked out and I just remember we—we drank an enormous amount and we were drinking after work a lot and like nobody knew what was going on or what was going to happen and we were all pretty young. We were like just a few years out of college and we were working at this big company, because we were young people with Internet skills, and and they were paying us pretty well at like these dotcom companies, you know, and, so we—so we drank a lot. I think that that was sort of like a formula for that and we were all like really stressed out and yeah so it was like those—those coworkers who I ended up talking more with about being trans—more than that I kind of like fooled around in alleys with, during that period too and so it was a little bit like being in high school again in some ways, in part because you know, I had been like, pretty emotionally shut down after high school and, yeah I don’t know. Then at one point I was just like, “Ok I guess I better—I guess I better research how to be trans on the Internet.” I think it was in like, 2002, right? Because not—not that long after September 11th, and so I basically I—I sat at work for like seven hours or something, late at night, and was like, “Uh, ok, like here—here’s a bunch of stuff online about being trans,” and it was really—I have to say, Andrea James’ website, TSRoadmap [Transsexual & Transgender Road Map]...

**O’Brien:** I remember that.

**Clark:** Um, yeah, that was a—that was this like super practical, kind of retrogressive, certainly sort of set in its ways of like, you know, “Here’s—here’s your practical guide on being a trans woman” and I was like “Oh, well somebody has kind of laid this all out” and it was—again it was—sort of like made it really concrete, even though, you know like, a—a couple years later I was like, “Oh my gosh, that site? It’s like, so wrong in a bunch of ways” because I certainly did not just like follow all the instructions on the site, but at the time, I looked at it and I was like, “Oh wow this is actually a thing and it’s doable” and then I like, cried for about an hour, and then I was like, “Ok” [laughter] “I better do this” and so then I, like—I think I bought every book I could find about, about being trans or transgender including some medical texts and, you know, the autobiographic—autobiographical works that were around then: Riki Wilchins’ book and Kate Bornstein’s book, Packlethia and, uh—oh what was that book, “How Sex Changed: A History [of Transsexuality in the United States]?” I was like—that one I was like, “wow, this is like—I kind of agree with this one the—kind of politically,” unlike a lot of the other ones and, um—and so I like found every trans book I could find, which was like, you know, 15 books [laughter] and, and so I was reading them kind of privately and then, I—I was living with three other people in a two bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side of Time [Square], and two cats and so, inevitably someone was like, “Why do you have all these books?” [laughter] and I was like “Okay, I guess I’m out,” and—and then, that—yeah, was kind of it.
O'Brien: Oh wow. What was, your sense of, like—what did you imagine, coming out as trans or transitioning to be like? What was your developing conception of that?

Clark: Oh yeah, that's—that's a really good question, because at the time, even though there were—were people like Andrea James being like, “Look, here's what you do,” her model of it was like, “It's super, super expensive and you should save up $300,000,” [laughter] was kind of basically what it was, and I was like, “Ok, maybe I could do that. Maybe if I work really hard and save my money, I'll save up $300,000 or whatever for all this stuff,” but at least she was also like, “Look, here's what you do first: you have to get electrolysis” or whatever and was like, “And that will cost $70,000” [laughter] and so I was like “Ok at least, I could start” and so it was like, I was under the impression it was like, super difficult, extremely expensive [laughter], I was really—I was like, “Well, I either—I was—” the reason I was crying for an hour is like, “I guess I have to do this or else I'm just going to die or be really miserable so, I go—I have to do it, right?” It's like, “Maybe it's going to cost all the money that I have for—for ten years but whatever. It doesn't matter because it's like a life or death thing” and then the other—yeah and I was super terrified because I had all these fears going back to childhood of like, “Oh I'm just going to—I'm going to die if—I—if I am outed in one way or another” and, uh—and talking to my—my small number of queer friends from work about this, they sort of convinced me, you know, one—you know, one in particular, she was like, “Look, you know, you're not going to die. You're not going to be jobless.” I was—I had a pretty clear vision, which was influenced by some material made by trans people on the web, that being trans was like a living hell. There was—there's a website that used to be on Geocities that had like, giant flashing skulls and was basically like, “Do not—do not transition unless you absolutely have to because you will lose everything and your life will be terrible, but—so only do it if you are going to die,” and [laughter] so I was like, “Ok, I guess I have to, but this is going to be really bad” so I was like, “Ok, what's the worst that could happen? I could, like, have no job, maybe be, like, discriminated against in housing somehow, like, maybe get kicked out of my home, might not have any friends, children will throw things at you on the streets, [laughter] people will yell at you, nobody will hire you, yeah you'll never go on a date ever again.” Yeah it was sort of like, a litany of stuff like this and I was like, “Well, that doesn't really matter. I—I don't—there's—it's not really a choice.” Uh, so I was like, “I guess I just have to prepare for all those things” and, um—yeah and so my—my friend was like, “Look you're going to have to be able to get a job somehow, [inaudible]—even if a lot of places won't hire you, there are—there are, you know, like, LGBT organizations” I don't even remember if... I think it was at—at the point where “LGBT” had come into use, but she was like, “Look at the Gay Center [The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center] that you know—you know, maybe the Gay Center would hire you to do something, not a gay thing. You could like work in an office there, you could like, clean up after hours, you could like be a—a janitor” and I was like, “Yeah,” you know, I was like, “I—I—” and I had done, janitorial work and like custodial work and I had like, been a dishwasher and like, been like, a clean up on the side of the roads when I was a teenager doing odd jobs. I was like, “Yeah you know what? It's not really—it's not the end of the world, even though I was...had ma—I was—had been pretty psyched to get, a pretty decent, wage as a—as a website worker, in the
early 2000's. I was like, "Yeah, I guess that's—that's totally—it's better than being dead," and now it seems so bizarre that she was like, "Well maybe the—maybe the LGBT Community Center will—will hire trans people to be custodians" [laughter]—

O'Brien: [laughter] yeah.

Clark: —because, like nothing against custodial work, that's for sure, but it's sort of weird to be like, “This is what I can maybe imagine you doing,” but I think she was also sort of presenting it as like, “Look,” as like, you know, “What's the worst thing. It's not like you're actually going to starve to death. We'll find a job—some kind of a job for you,” but that was sort of like, what I was contemplating um...

O'Brien: Did you know any trans people?

Clark: I did not know any trans people. I had only ever seen trans people on television. I had nobody—nobody that I could talk to who was trans. Um, I...Yeah, it wasn't until after I had been out for a little while that I even saw another trans person in the flesh. I actually went to The LGBT Community Center and there was a panel about, about restroom access that included Melissa Sklarz, who's still around in New York City politics, and Dean Spade, and, I was—I got super mad, at Melissa Sklarz and this one trans guy whose name I can't remember who was on the panel, because they were like, “Well, you know, I can understand why—why some people would be, you know, really worried about having crossdressers or people whose gender isn't stable in some way, or you know people that they think look like men in bathrooms—we have to be reasonable about this" and Dean—Dean was like, “No." [laughter] 
That's—that is bullshit," and this was right after Dean had been thrown out of the Grand Central [Station], bathrooms during the WTO [World Trade Organization] protests I believe, and yeah for sort of not looking sufficiently masculine, so he was pretty pissed about it and I was also like, “That is fucked up,” because at that point, the only contact that I had had with trans people was going online to look for message boards and at the time I was hanging out in a website that I think is still around called Susan's Place or something like that, or it might just be called TGForums or something and it was all this very, like, passing-oriented—what I think of as now as like the pretty conservative transition advice where it was like, “Oh you know, post a picture of yourself wearing makeup and we'll criticize your makeup” and being like “Oh you look—this makes you look too trans” or “makes you look too masculine” or something like that and yeah, like there was sort of no hint of trans liberation or anything that was very, like—like genuinely trans positive. It was mostly like, “Oh here's—here's how you can get by. Oh you know we have to kind of, figure out some way to like, get people to tolerate us’ kind of stuff and, uh—and I—I kind of—[chafed against it a lot, but I was also just trying to figure out how—how I could actually survive and get by and they were like, the only trans people I knew and were sort of like, the people that posted on that forso it was—it was a big relief when I was—I actually saw like, oh, there's someone—there are trans people who are like, “No, that's not ok, like, we actually need something better” because that—it was much more in line with my—my view of politics since my—my family's pretty leftist and we believe in
protest politics and we believe in—in more radical change than, just kind of trying to like, accommodate and tolerate, so um...yeah, so it was a relief to actually see, like Dean Spade up on stage saying that stuff and I think I—I made sure to go to a CLAGS [Center for LGBTQ Studies] conference that he was speaking at next because I was like, “I want to know more about this Dean Spade character” and then I introduced myself to him and that’s how I—I got involved in, in SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project] too, which he was sort of putting together at that point.

O’Brien: Tell me about SRLP.

Clark: So, SRLP, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, was initially just Dean. It was kind of a name that he had chosen for this fellowship that he was doing at the Urban Justice Center, in part because Sylvia Rivera had recently passed away. He wanted to kind of commemorate her and had like—had you know talked with some of her family about whether it was appropriate. The, um—and he was a—you know, a White trans-guy, who was not not heavily invested in the way that he presented himself in sort of looking like a—like a—like, meeting 100% societal expectations of what like, a man is supposed to look like and, uh—but, at the time, he was wearing a lot of argyle and kind of had like, a dapper, faggy style going on, and I was like, “Yeah, I approve of this,” [laughter] you know, the sort of queering of the—of the trans—of transgender expression, right? Where—as opposed to, “Let’s just try to emulate, like, cis-normativity as much as possible” and, Dean was—had basically just opened up a little legal clinic to help whatever trans people were around with legal problems and he had, a couple—like he had—was not long out of law school and had this fellowship at the Urban Justice Center and had a couple interns who were in law school including Franklin Romeo and um—and Bridge Joyce and, uh—and they were all sort of—just like, you know, had a lot of clients coming in, being like, “Hey, I need help with my name change” mostly and I—I was kind of intent on doing my name change DIY [do it yourself] this was like—would be in like, 2002, but I—I was so paranoid about it that I—I asked them to look it over for me, so they didn’t actually represent me in my name change but like I got their—their legal advice and worked with them on it and, uh—and so I was sort of—I was hanging around with them and Dean was like, “Hey, who are you? Where did you come from?” was kind of the feeling, and I was like, “Yeah, I’m—I’m just me, I’m around” and, uh—yeah and so I started—I started hanging out with those guys because we were sort of politically sympatico. I was really into the fact that they were doing this work and they were kind of espousing a pretty different point of view. That was also around the same time that I—I switched message boards and found strap-on.org, which had been around for a while. I don't remember how I found it, originally, but I stumbled into it and I was like, “Oh, this is a much more, culturally relevant to me, younger people, people with radical politics, people, you know, with the same kind of sensibilities that I have, like, place to hang out that’s not, sort of people who are ten years older than me and really deeply set on trying to, like, have as normative lives as possible,” and so, yeah between that and then some of the folks who were around SRLP in those early years, I suddenly had kind of an actual social setting that I—I felt like I could exist in, and not be totally alone, which was a new experience for me, but SRLP, yeah, started growing quickly.
Dean was involved with a lot of things. He was trying to actually set it up as an organization rather than just himself at a fellowship. He started talking with another friend Sonia Stevison about whether they could start it up as an organization and like she would do the fundraising and he would sort of do the legal work and, uh—and then, you know, there were a bunch of us around, the legal interns and other friends and it was—it was a little social circle of trans people. I remember one year we all marched in—in the Pride parade as a little SRLP contingent. That must have been like 2003 maybe, and, yeah we were the only ones handing out flyers about like police—police brutality and, people hated it, [laughter] that we were doing that.

O'Brien: Wow.

Clark: Um, I had one old lady wad up a flyer about police brutality and throw it at me, saying that it was nonsense: like an old, White lady [laughter], but it did sort of strike home the fact that like, “Ok, we’re—we’re doing this stuff that people don’t really want to hear or think about. We’re the kind of weird, angry end of the LGBT spectrum at the end of the T,” and, so it felt important and it was—it was a social context and, uh—and there was work to do and I—I started off kind of by trying to help put together the first website that SRLP had, which was really a page to get information out about Toilet Training, the documentary that SRLP was working on at the time, with Tara Mateik, the—a filmmaker and, um—yeah and so something was like, “Oh ok. This is meaningful volunteer work,” which I—I wasn’t new to, having, you know, worked, for the ACLU for a bit and so forth, but all of a sudden it was like, “Oh. This is volunteer work that I’m doing with people that I’m also hanging out socially—with socially. They’re actually like a context in which I can be a trans person and not feel like a complete weirdo,” and then, yeah and then also it was kind of like, we [inaudible] fighting for some kind of, actual ability to exist in the world and be able to go to the bathroom and stuff so I was, uh—I was pretty energized by all of that stuff, even as I kind of continued to—yeah, I guess I—I continued to work at Lego and was not—I was only kind of out at Lego, I—and I didn’t—I didn’t totally come out at work until 2004 when they were actually shutting down the office. They moved all their operations to England at that point and I was like, “I’m not going and by the way I’m a girl, please change all of my information for bureaucratic purposes,” [laughter] so it was kind of a nice opportunity to just be like, “peace out,” I don’t—I didn’t really want to deal with—there were like a lot of weird, misogynist programmers at that company, so I was like, “Yeah I don’t feel totally safe just being totally out and myself, in that context,” but, um—but yeah, I was just kind of willing to do it and as a parting gesture, I was like, “By the way...”

O'Brien: Tell me about Strap-On.

Clark: So Strap-On was a message board that was started, as an offshoot of the—the, Chainsaw Records message board and then I think also had a period of time or, roots in the Twee Kitten message board, which was like a—like a queercore, punk music boards and I was never really into the, uh—the queercore punk scene but, um—and so I—I had not
participated in it back then, but it kind of became known as a gathering place, I think particularly for—for trans identified youth, like teens and twenties, in part because there had been a few trans women there who had kind of galvanized some opposition to the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, saying like, you know, “Punk—queer punk musicians should not play at this festival because the policy is transphobic” and I think as a result of that, especially sort of after it split off and became its own message board, Strap-On, it kind of started to gather a—a bit of moss as it rolled and, pick up, you know, more queer and trans—trans people who were on the young side, had, you know, a bit of a weirder punk or kind of nonconforming sensibility, and who were kind of not—you know, not into this like, really mainstreaming—what’s the word, that I’m looking for—assimilationist perspective on—on queerness and gender, so yeah, like I fell—fell into that crowd because I—I think I just came across the message board somehow. I think it—it was not as a result of anyone in New York that I knew mentioning it. I don’t know, it might have been—it’s possible that it was Dean, because it was around the time I joined was also [phone ringtone] when—oh, I’m sorry. It was also when, um...Yeah there was some criticism of how Dean Spade and Craig Willse were talking about this bathroom incident that happened during the WTO protests and there were some people on—on Strap-On criticizing it, so it’s possible that I heard about it just because someone was talking about it, in New York and then I—I looked it up, but when I—when I got there, I kind of was reading these message board threads, I was like, “Oh wow, I found my people.” [laughter] You know, it was, you know a lot of younger people—mostly younger than me. At the time I was like 26 or 27, and most of the people were sort of younger, a lot of college students, but they were—yeah they were talking about radical politics, they were talking about, politics of oppression and resistance and they were sort of joking around and being goofy in a—in a pretty, I guess—you know, kind of, early meme-like message board culture way, but, everyone was—was queer or trans or a weirdo in some regard and it—everyone was sort of, like, figuring out their identity and like, where they stood in terms of, privilege and what they were dealing with in real life and ways that they were oppressed and like, whether they could, come out and, like, fights that they were having with people about politics and about, you know, being—being themselves at school or in various spaces and—and we were fighting each other all the time too, over—yeah, like, what—what kinds of attitudes were messed up or not, like what was problematic, right? And like, that was kind of almost what Strap-On became most known for, was like, “This is the crucible in which people are yelling at each other about, like, what’s problematic and what’s not,” and—and crying and storming off and then coming back and talking about how they feel really marginalized by a particular discussion because it’s not including the concerns of the—of a particular group of oppressed people, yeah and I guess, you know, many years later when these—these sorts of topics, about like, “Has call-out culture gone too far?” or people complaining about Tumblr culture started to just go across the Internet, I was like, “Oh yeah, that was—I’m like really familiar with this from, like, a dozen or more years ago” because it’s—it’s like, very, very—was very similar to this little, kind of, microcosm of that stuff on Strap-On and some people have, like, blamed Strap-On, to mean over as like, “You—you people started all this,” which I don’t think is true. Um, it’s—we’re just sort of like an early example of the kind of things that people are more prone to complain about in wider spheres now, but, uh—I—I
after having been hanging around there for a couple years, I—uh—I picked a username, which I still use to this day, metasynthie and, um—and then also I became a moderator of that board too, since I think I was sort of—I was one of the slightly older people and I had been around on internet message boards for many years having run a, bulletin board system when I was in high school before the Internet was really available and then run the message boards for my online magazine when I was a college student and so forth, so I kind of understood how to—how to, like, get people to listen to you or pay attention to you by being—by saying smart things online, which I think is less true now. It used to be like, people would read, like, longer posts online, then, than they do now, but that was kind of what I felt like I specialized in, was like, “Oh ok, everybody’s having a big fight. Well, let me—let me try and like, lay this out” and it was very gratifying because then these people were like, “Ooh you’re so smart” and there was a lot of that at Strap-On too, of people praising each other for being really smart. [phone ringtone] Yeah, so Strap-On, right?

**O’Brien:** What was your username a reference to?

**Clark:** Um, I was trying to think of a username that I felt like would—would capture something about my gender [scratching on floor]. I don’t remember what my—I think the username I used before was that of this domain that I’ve had for a long time, which I still use for my—for my email and—I kind of felt like, “Oh that’s a—it’s a pretty gender neutral kind of username or domain” that I had been attached to for a long time, but I kind of wanted to signal a little bit, like, “Ok, I—I’m on, like, the trans-feminine spectrum” and I was thinking about—at the time, I think, about the distinction between synthesis and analysis and, yeah and about the difference between physics and metaphysics and so I think I just sort of portmanteau’d, I—that words, like, of metasynthesis, which I don’t even know what it means, right? It’s not like really a reference to anything and I was like, “I—that actually makes a pretty good, slightly—slightly femmy—just like, barely femmy username if you just change ‘synthesis’ into ‘synthie’” so that was basically it.

**O’Brien:** Where—what were the major political differences or tendencies within Strap-On?

**Clark:** I think some of it was definitely about who got to speak about what kinds of things, right? So, the—Strap-On was divided into a bunch of sub-forums and there was a forum in which only trans or gender nonconforming people were allowed to post. There was a forum in which only people of color could post, there was a forum for femmes, which I think was a—you know, a little bit of a hazier edge there, but it was—there was a forum for people who, who grew up in or were poor, so it was sort of like, you know, like a class oriented one, so along—I think as many different axes—like major axes of oppression that we sort of identified as being important, at least the big ones where there were people who asked for it and said like, “Oh I—you know, I really want a forum to talk about being fat and fatphobia,” so we’re like, “Yes” and we made that forum? So we didn’t—it wasn’t like we were able to sort of subdivide endlessly, but if there were people saying, like, “Yeah there are some of us that want to talk about this issue. Can we have like a—a space that’s just for—just for those
subjects and for those posters? Uh, can we have that?” But it—a lot of argument and discussion resulted from that, where we’re like, “Ok who gets to post in the people of color forum?” like what’s—what’s the center of it? And so there was a lot of kind of emerging analysis that was really—yeah, informed sometimes by—by theory, sometimes by lived experience, usually kind of like a heady blend of stuff and then a lot of upset feelings too and—yeah, about, ok where—where is the edge of people of color? Does that construct make sense? Um, you know, what—what about Romani people from Europe? What about, you know, people who are—who are, like—think—or have been told by their parents that they’re 1/8th Cherokee. Things like that. It’s like where—where are the edges of these things and so there were a lot of—lot of arguments and debates. Sometimes they got quite personal, about that kind of stuff. There were occasionally some, like yeah, very heavy-duty discussions about trans issues and, yeah, how to—how to deal with—with, differing attitudes towards people’s bodies, talking about, not—not so far as—I think the whole forum was sort of predicated on the idea of like, the—“We’re in opposition to the Michigan Womyn’s Festival’s blanket exclusion of trans women,” right? The um—but there were a lot of discussions about, “Well, where do preferences come into play?” Like, is it ok to—to be like, “I don’t sleep with trans women. I like trans men, but not cis men. How do we make sense of like, these kinds of sexual preferences in the context of—of people being oppressed?” Uh so there were a lot of, like, arguments and trying to hash through those things with, you know, very, very mixed results, I think, and I tried to, you know, say smart things when I could, but it was also very much an exercise for me of like, actually thinking through my own issues and my own feelings, like, trying to articulate a gender politics on that site, and, yeah like, a bunch of discussions about…yeah like what people’s individual relationships to beauty standards and expectations about bodies and like, how they were negotiating that and yeah, like, arguments erupted in those contexts too, since when one person is talking positively about like, “Well here’s how I deal with it and cope about it, and you know, and cope with issues particular to the ways that I’m oppressed,” then uh—then it’s quite possible, or maybe inevitable that they make statements that generalize or frame things in a certain way that make someone else feel excluded or marginalized and like, how—you know, “How can you say this thing?” Even though it’s about your experience. It’s like if you don’t super strictly use “I” statements all the time, it’s quite easy to make, make a comment that makes someone else upset and I think we’re sort of used to this in, say like, a therapeutic encounter group, right? Like that’s kind of the stuff of a group like that: is like, “Wait, but you’re saying this stuff and like, that really screws up my process,” but this was a message board, which was meant to be, like, both just a casual hangout space where people were talking about music and crushes and whatever and like, you know, what was going on around them in their sort of local scenes and also this space where people were like, working out these deep issues with each other, but online where, you know—where people are kind of, like, flinging things back and forth semi-pseudonymously, but also, like, hooking up with each other and I, um—I met a—a girlfriend who I dated for several years on Strap-On. Um, it was probably, yeah, like one of the first communities where I actually felt like, “Oh, you know, I—I have friends who are like me. I can—I can meet other queers, who actually, you know, might consider me, like, a possible dating partner.” Um, it was actually—yeah, it had the elements of an actual social scene—a
community, where you could sort of exist like—like anybody else. So it was a—it was—yeah incredibly valuable for me in that context, especially because locally, with—with people who were in SRLP, there were very, very few, um—very few trans women: like a—like a few around, at least at the beginning and then as time went on, a few more trans women showed up and actually, a number of them like Elana Redfield, who went on to work for SRLP, were people that I also knew through Strap-On and there were even some people who, because there were a bunch of Strap-On people in New York, moved to the city, like uh—like Bryn Kelly, moved here in part because she knew a bunch of people here from the message board, but the—but both Strap-On and—and the communities around SRLP had kind of grown out of what, you know, five or ten years before had been, like lesbian and—or sort of maybe more properly, like, dyke-centered communities and um—yeah and so there were a lot of trans-masculine people and a smaller number of trans women and the—it was pretty clear that a lot of the trans women in New York were—were quite disconnected from community and that there were very few, like, strong, loci of where trans women were gathering and that, there were—yeah there was this sort of the—the ball scene, where there were a lot of Black drag queens and trans women. There were, sort of Latina clubs for trans women, and then there was sort of like everybody else, who for whatever reason, were not part of—of those scenes and it certainly wasn’t like, every Black or Latina, trans woman was sort of part of one of those groups, either. They were sort of like, isolated individuals and so over time, I think—it happened more rapidly on Strap-On, because it was people from all over the place kind of realizing, “Oh this is actually a place that’s friendly for trans women” and kind of, gathered up there and there were—although I think Strap-On was predominantly White, there were also quite a few people of color, on that site who were major presences. Um, Black women and—and quite a lot of Asians and Latinos too. The um—and—at SRLP, I think it—it took a little bit longer for the community around SRLP to actually have more trans women, so in the period of time between, like, maybe 2002 and 2006 or so, I was—I think I really leaned quite heavily on Strap-On as a place where I was actually connecting socially with other trans women too.

O’Brien: What would you say some of the tendencies or insights from Strap-On that helped shape trans politics today are?

Clark: Ooh, that’s a tricky one. I mean I think it was—Strap-On was quite devoted to intersectional politics, right? From pretty early on and—as sort of shown by, like, everything that I was saying about all these different forums and they weren’t just kind of considered independently, but like you could actually see the intersections happening there, and I think—yeah, some of these ideas about a—a more total view of gender liberation that wasn’t about having to conform to certain types of standards or expectations in order to be able to be trans. A lot of, um—there were a ton of arguments about—about realness. Really, you know, what—what makes you sort of a legitimate trans subject. Like how do you know that you’re trans, and I think that the—the outcome over and over again of those discussions was, like—like nobody—nobody can tell you, right? Like all of these kind of attempts to police the boundaries of being trans are full of shit and that really it’s your—your own liberation that
you have to, like, figure out for yourself and not, um—not just sort of follow someone else's guidelines and, uh—and that it's—yeah that it's ok for you to be you. I think that that—that came across again and again even though there were these sort of constant, I—pressures I guess that from outside of like trying to figure out, like, “Oh is it surgery that sort of makes a trans person more legitimate? Is it passing that makes a trans person more legitimate?” All these things and exploring people's discomfort around all these topics and I think it just—over time, it kind of accreted, like “Oh there’s just—there’s just a lot, a lot of different ways of being trans,” and that there—that scrabbling for legitimacy is not really going to help anybody. It’s—it's sort of like a, you know, a fool's game under capitalism, an oppressive system that tries to turn us against each other. So I think that—that came out a lot in a way that wasn’t—it's not the way that it would have come out by like, one brilliant theorist writing about it and sort of laying it all out, although certainly, you know, Strap-On was definitely influenced by—by people like Judith Butler. Um, it was kind of like, boiled up in a stew by many, many dozens of people kind of thrashing at it and wrestling with it personally over time, that it was like, “Ok this is kind of what's agreed upon” as a result—by this—by this community: people sort of struggling with themselves and each other and the communities that they were in.

O'Brien: And, so SRLP, you described it both as a service project and organizing and as a community for you. Can you tell me more about how those things worked together and evolved over time?

Clark: Yeah, that's a—a good question. So, those—those motivations were definitely intertwined for me, like I—I was working, a day job, um—a few different day jobs over the—over the course of the, sort of early years of SRLP, because after I left Lego and began trying to interview to get a job as an, um—an out trans woman in New York, and that—that was difficult sort of whole other story. I worked at, Lambda Legal for a while, working on their website before I—I actually came to work in video games, but SRLP was this—was a place that I could go to be around other trans people and sort of be working on something together that was important and where we were having, yeah, like pretty real conversations about a lot of the same kinds of politics. You were there for some of the early conversations, about like these intersections of race and class and trans issues and all that stuff was being hashed out in a way that wasn’t just theoretical or social or personal but also, like had to be intensely practical to figure out, like, what work is going to get done? How is going to get funded? How is it going to be accountable? How is it going to involve different people from different experiences and all this stuff? So it was very, very intense and felt extremely real and was, I think a pretty high priority for me, in terms of where I was putting my energy, because of all of that, and then also—yeah and also it was a social context and a lot of the people who were involved as volunteers, as collective members, as employees also sort of knew and hung out with each other socially at, you know, queer dance parties on—on the weekends. This is the period of time when like, a lot of people were going to The Hole, they had a bar on the Lower East Side that on Thursday nights had, I guess it’s—yeah it's a sort of a—a mostly like a gay, male owned bar back then, the space is still owned by the same people, but, on Thursday
nights they were like, “Oh yeah, we'll have a women's night,” but this particular women's night was—was flocked to by all—like—a—a ton of trans people, like mostly trans-masculine people, but then like, a lot of other people in sort of surrounding social networks. Um, yeah the kind of—the radical queer social scene, I guess you could call it, of New York, and I think that's—that's how people referred to it many years, maybe they still do and um—yeah, so it was—it was very deep—by very deeply interconnected. So like a lot of the people that were in that social scene were also volunteering at SRLP or could be counted on to show up for a fundraiser or something like that, and were the real stalwarts. I remember when we used to try to go to—go a little bit further afield to try to do fundraising at social events that were—yeah like at other types of venues or house parties of people, like, in the same age group and economic bracket. We—we definitely had a lot less success in sort of like reaching out to people or raising money, in part because it's like a—a hipster party of a bunch of people who have gathered around musical taste in Williamsburg or something like that is just generally not a good place to do fundraising it seems like. You know they're like not going to give money—give you money, for a cause. At least not back then, unlike, say like, you know, wealthy gay art gallery owners will probably give you some donations and uh—but the—there was this kind of core group of people who were like the—the social circle that SRLP was embedded in and—yeah, it was—and that group of people, for me existed as—as the backdrop and support for SRLP and also as a place to sort of, in the real world, actually—that like had all of my friends were kind of connected to that in some way and then as more—as people sort of got involved in that social scene also because there was strong overlaps with Strap-On, there were, you know, maybe eight or nine of us who were also kind of like pretty longtime contributors to Strap-On, especially after people like Bryn moved here and uh—and like Jack Aponte, the uh—yeah—it was—it was kind of my—my whole social world was kind of entangled together and then—so it was like, the people that I hang out with, my sort of extended queer family that, you know, I would like go hang out at somebody's house and have Sunday dinner together. That kind of stuff, and um—yeah and it was also in those social circles that—that's where I dated too, because, I think it's true for a—a number of—a lot of trans people, I think maybe more reliably for trans-masculine people in the radical queer scene than for trans women, because it's like, “Oh, this is where I actually know that when I meet queer people, they're not going to immediately, like, be freaked out by the fact that I'm trans and not know what to do with it or be flailing around or you know, yeah, be uncertain and maybe be like, ‘I guess I could try that experimentally'” which is kind of the default if you're sort of trying to date people that you don't already know in the—in the rest of the world, or even the rest of the—the gay world of New York City, so, it was like the—the safe dating pool, I guess, for a lot of trans people and a lot easier for trans-masculine people than for trans women, but I...yeah from—between—between Strap-On and the radical queer, environs of New York, I—I dated a lot of people and uh—so that—it kind of worked out well for me [laughter] in that sense and I—yeah, that was as much a motivation for me to sort of be around and like doing work and participating in community, as the political stuff was, for sure, and, you know, that's like a big part of why, you know, young people go to dance parties, right? [laughter] and so...
O'Brien: Is there more you'd like to include about SLRP before we move on?

Clark: Um, I could certainly go on and on about SRLP. I think one of the most significant things is that it's always tried its hardest to operate as a collective structure on a consensus decision making model, and with a very, very flat structure, like we don't have an executive director or anything like that and I think that that's...that to me is one of, like, the most enduring facts about SRLP and it's always tried to be, like, you know, very, very guided by some bedrock political principles and it's just—it's been a—a struggle along the way. I've been involved with it since—since back then, when—when it kind of became a collective in 200—in 2003 or 2004. I guess we're almost at the 15 year anniversary of when Dean started in 2002, but yeah there have been—a—a lot of ups and downs. I think it's been really hard to figure out how to reconcile trying to provide legal services for people who—in the local community who really need it and like need help because they are in prison or can't get their benefits or ID documents or are having problems with their immigration status. Like all that stuff feels incredibly urgent, and at the same time, SRLP has always wanted to be a center of organizing and actually sort of generative politics going outwards and it's—it's been a struggle for the entire history of the organization to try and like hold both of those things at once and try to make sure that like, you know, that they're in balance with each other and both managing to be funded and—and all this stuff. It feels like very—very important work and at the same time I think it's—it's been a little hard for me over the years to see a—see the sort of solid, plodding forward work of SRLP, get eclipsed by, you know, larger organizations that are a little bit more agile in, um—in getting the message out very widely about, uh—about political struggles, certainly once we sort of hit the Internet age of—of trans organizing, I think people that are using the Internet platform to sort of spread, messages and education about trans people have been way more influential than SRLP, because the landscape has transformed so drastically in the last few years and even before that, I think you know, other local organizations doing similar work like, like TLDEF, the Trans Legal Defense & Education Fund. Um, I think were—were better at making kind of an—an impact on—on the spectacular level of the national stage of like, “Oh this is a big important case. We need to make sure everyone knows about this.” SRLP has always just been a little bit more of a local, you know, got to try and make sure people are taken care of and we also try to do a little bit of organizing but—and that's been sort of growing very, very steadily and slowly over the years, but it's always kind of been an uphill battle because we're trying to do both of those things at once and they're a little bit in tension with each other, but I—I feel like it's—it's been—well it's been incredibly worthwhile for me personally and I know that, SRLP's work has changed the lives of—of just many, many, many people who have been directly helped by services and been meaningful for people as a place to sort of come together, and share analysis and organize and as sort of a welcoming space too and uh—yeah and it's—it's changed drastically in the last few years. There—you know there's a whole new set of people there than when I started and the kind of original crew of SRLP, I guess yeah all of the kind of original crew had left by like 2015.

O'Brien: So, you're still involved?
Clark: Yeah—yeah, I'm still on the collective. I think I'm—I'm technically the board chair but that's just because somebody has to like, sign the forms and stuff and I've been around the longest and yeah so, I still try to stay involved as kind of an—I guess kind of an elder member. A lot of the staff now are—yeah they're people who have been—come on board just in the last two to three years, some of them just one year, so I try to provide a sense of institutional memory, I think is like, one of my main functions [laughter] now and um—yeah some perspective and, you know, help resolving some things, so I'm far less involved than I used to be just mostly because of—of time and uh—and having like a pretty busy full-time job now and not having quite as much energy as I used to, but then I also often think somewhat reprimandingly to myself like, “Oh. I'm not—I'm not as hooked into the social side,” like that whole social side of SRLP is like really different now. It's not that original set of people and for a long time it was like my close friendships and relationships that like really kept me very close to SRLP and when that changed, I—you know, I—I'm now more in the mode of like, “I drop by to—to help out when I can, like when there's something in particular I could of use for, when I actually, like, have room in my schedule to actually make it to a meeting,” but I'm not—I'm not as regular a presence as I—as I once was.

O'Brien: Has, the politics changed or developed at SLRP, would you say?

Clark: I think that there's—it—it has changed and developed, I think with the—the people that are involved. I think that the—the slightly newer, slightly younger set of—of activists, organizers, and lawyers of SRLP are—are more keenly aware of—that you—that it's a danger to, kind of, work yourself to death or to the point of burnout. Um, they're a little bit more well-versed in trying to think about organization sustainably, which is really nice and I don't think that the overall politics and mission of SRLP have changed. I think that there's a much higher awareness than there used to be of anti-Black racism specifically, which, of course has, you know, been influenced in part by the Black Lives Matter movement and although SRLP has always kind of organized against police violence, I think it—you know, it's taken on a different, urgency and tenor with, the yeah—just of course the escalating, violence specifically against Black people, and I think that SRLP has gotten better and better over time at including, specifically Black and Latina trans women in the—sort of the organizing part of the work. Um, there still are not as many, Black and Latina trans women working directly for the organization as I would like—or as—as I think anybody there would like, but it's been kind of difficult to sort of keep the organization staffed period and keep up with all the work as—as there's been quite a bit of tumult, but I think things are—things are getting a little bit better in terms of organizational stability, after the sort of huge turnover of like, a lot of the original staff and the long-term staff leaving all kind of in one year a couple years ago, so yeah I'm optimistic that, you know, SRLP kind of knows what a bunch of its problems are and is always kind of struggling with—with limited human capacity to try and figure those things out [laughter] so I think that they'll—they'll just keep on doing that and very, very slowly getting better, but it's—yeah it's always like, a little bit at a time with SRLP because there's
constantly just a huge amount of work to do to just help people with their— their pressing sort of survival problems with the legal system.

O'Brien: So, you mentioned your own employment difficulties when you left Lego and you mentioned Lambda—

Clark: Mhmm.

O'Brien: What was your arc of, professional work and employment after you came out as trans?

Clark: Yeah so when I came out as trans, I—I had decided to leave this job at Lego and I had—I had some savings, but at the time, I was still under the impression of like, “Well I need to save this enormous amount of money in order to be trans,” and, yeah so I actually went around and—and interviewed a few places and actually, I—I was surprised—and I got some job offers, nobody made mention of me being trans, I have no idea whether I was passing or not, but, it wasn’t really that much of an issue, and so I actually realized, “Oh maybe I could sort of pick what job I want.” I almost went to work for some massive hotel chain. I can’t remember what it was, like Marriott or something, just because I was looking for any job, but then I think it was—yeah, it was actually Dean that mentioned that Lambda Legal was looking for someone to work on their website, so I applied there, and—and they were—they were quite happy to have me because I had some experience and, you know, also I was a now different kind of diversity hire. The um—yeah and—but I wasn't super happy working at Lambda in part because it wasn't quite the type of creative work in entertainment that I had been used to doing at Lego, where I worked on a lot of games and toys and software creativity tools for kids, and—and also I—I was sort of a little bit annoyed by Lambda's politics of the time, where they were—they were quite focused on impact litigation with model clients, who could not possibly have any kind of criminal record or any sort of problems in their past, and so they—you know, they had these clients who were, like, wealthy, White gay people who had been discriminated against at their country club: like, actual case, right? And I was like, “This is not” you know “This is not really what I want to be doing,” it’s certainly very different than our—the approach at SRLP, which is sort of focused on the most vulnerable people first, so I—I leapt at the chance—I had a friend who was telling me, like, “Hey, you should really ask your friends who you worked with and did projects with at Lego whether they’re hiring or like, you know, just try to get back into that kind of work, um you know, I bet—I bet they—that they might actually be interested or have a job for you,” and I was like, “Oh ok I'll do that” and then it turned out, yeah actually a—a friend of mine, whose office is on the other side of that wall, was—was hiring at his game company and I had worked with, his game company on a number of projects at Lego, where I was kind of acting as like the...on the sort of—the publisher side or sort of producer side, like hiring them to make some games for Lego's website and—and yeah so when I talked to him, he was like, “Oh—oh my gosh, yeah of course we would love to have you, it would be really awesome, you have a ton of experience with this stuff from working at Lego” and so all of a sudden, I was
like, “Oh I could actually just work on games all the time,” which I don’t think—had somehow like—hadn’t quite occurred to me because I sort of thought of myself as a web person who had a lot of expertise in games and often was sort of like—you know headed up game projects because of that, but I think I had always been, like, a little bit intimidated by the idea of working in video games but—I but I went to work for that company and um—yeah and I’ve been working as a game designer ever since then and I—I worked at that company which was called GameLab from about 200—uh 2005 until 2008, then it was—sort of went out of business as the sort of recession hit and I worked for a number of other, like small startup companies making games here in New York over the next few years and did a lot of freelancing, as well, worked on my own games, did some educational games through PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] and other places like that, wrote a textbook with another trans woman, about games, which was really cool and yeah, then all of a sudden in like, 2012 there were like a kajillion trans women working in games, and I had never met any trans people making games before that and all of a sudden there was this gigantic wave of, you know, what—what’s kind of being called the Queer—Queer Games Movement, started around like 2012, and yeah and then there were all these—the younger trans people being like, “Oh my gosh! You’ve been here this whole time? Who are you?” again [laughter] and I’m just like “Yeah I’m just me, you know, I’ve been just plodding along working, finding what work I can, working as a freelancer,” but then all of a sudden there was this, you know, whole big other community of queers and trans people entering into this field where I had kind of been plodding away working professionally for many years, while having a—sort of a totally separate sphere of stuff that I was working on with SRLP and in the uh—the uh radical queer community that was my main social context. Um, yeah so that was kind of like a whole other new, weird chapter and yeah and then a few years ago I ended up here at uh—at NYU [New York University] where I’m teaching students how to make games and yeah—and I have like a, you know, ton of queer and trans students here too so all of a sudden it’s like...yeah I’ve went from being really alone in general here in New York to finding this context of Strap-On and SRLP where I could actually be around other trans people and then reached another sort of crust where it was like all of a sudden also my—the—my professional life and my—you know the sphere in which I do cultural production and criticism, also now there’s a whole bunch of queer and trans people, which in that intervening time, it was like, all of my interactions with queer and trans people were outside of work and all of my interactions in the professional sphere were with cis people and like mostly White guys, yeah so...

O’Brien: So what happened with—why—what lead to so many trans women entering into the gaming industry? How did that go down and what was that like?

Clark: I am not totally sure. I think there were—there were a couple of key figures that kind of all popped up at around the same time. I think for—I think trans people, especially trans women, there have been a lot of—of trans women who were involved in games and videogames for many years for various reasons. Um, people speculate as to why. It—it may have something to do with the power of make believe or being a nerd, any number of reasons. The sort of ability to kind of, like, step outside yourself for a while. So there are—I think there
have always been a lot of trans people in games, especially trans women because I think it's during the 80's and 90's at least, games were heavily—much more heavily pushed onto male assigned people and so it—it leads to this point where yeah, like there's a bunch of trans women who have grown up thinking about games as a source of refuge and some of them are learning how to make games and then deciding to transition and kind of like a lot of the—the people that I met on Strap-On, they're—they're a bit younger than me, maybe you know closer to like ten years, or ten to twelve years younger than me in the case of, all the trans women in games but the um—at the older end of that range, maybe only a few years younger than me is Anna Anthropy who was the coauthor of the textbook that I wrote about designing games and she is kind of, very much in the lead of this stuff. She, was part of a—a community of sort of more artistically minded independent game creators in New York and also in like, online forums that were centered around games and she came out at some point and uh was—was very—was very open about it, in part I think—well I don't know, I can't really speak for her, but she came from a different generation than me. Like when I first was trying to figure out how to transition, like I was saying it was all of this very, very conformism-oriented assimilationist stuff that I kind of came up with and then like broke out of by finding Strap-On, and Anna for multiple reasons including that you know, I think she always, you know, saw herself as a, you know, not necessarily going to pass and just doesn't give a shit about it, like, um willing to be seen as a pissed off trans lady, and kind of just straightforwardly out, and I think the way that I was, like, raised in trans culture was to think that that was like, way too deadly, and that's a just in part of the fact that it was like five years before or something like that—or ten years before, Anna was coming out and so she kind of like really shook people up a lot in a way that I never did because I was—I was a little bit, like more, like, under the radar not talking about being trans, like everyone that I worked with knew that I was trans, right? For the most part, some people, I guess didn't, but I was—yeah I was mostly like, keeping it to myself and sort of like doing my own work and and like putting—putting themes from—from you know my life among the queers into my games in more subtle ways but there's a little bit more like, a gay person running for the Mary Tyler Moore show in like you know 1970's and—and Anna was like, just very much wearing it on her sleeve and started, you know, making games about being, a trans woman in a kink relationship, about being polyamorous, BDSM themes in games, all this stuff and it was—it was very, explosive in a lot of ways, like that people were like, “Oh my god, I had no idea you could even do that.” She made an autobiographical game about her transition, which was like, yeah an extremely, widely played game among people that play games online, including a lot of kids and it was like a lot of people’s first exposure to like, “Oh this is what transition involves?” Because it was in video game form and it’s an autobiographical video game of which there were, at the time, maybe like three examples in history. So she was like a—a definite pioneer and I think a lot of people—I—I when I met her and started hanging out with her because I was like, “I should—obviously I have to go meet Anna” there were a bunch of other people in the sort of queer scene in Oakland, [California] who—

O'Brien: Is that where she's based?
Clark: Yeah so that's where she was based at the time, she was actually—she was here in New York and then she moved out there, and she and her friends and her sort of—yeah extended circle of friends including some, people that she was in various kinds of relationships with, and other people from the sort of nearby area—a lot of them got—were getting interested in making games or they were interested in games already and were also like, “Oh I can be out and queer and make games. I can be trans and make games, and it sort of started to snowball, turned into this, quote “Queer Games Scene,” which I have to put in quotes because there was a lot of, I think overexposure and sort of like a scene was named by people outside of the scene, which can often cause a sort of little joint creative enterprise to disintegrate in on itself once it’s like, “This is who you people are,” right? So I think there was a bit of a problem with that and a lot of them were kind of pissed off that they were just being sort of seen in this one way or that they were being—being told by the media, like, “Oh these people are making games to help you understand what it’s like to be queer or trans,” uh and yeah I was kind of like standing at one side of all this stuff being like, “Yeah you guys go for it. I’m supporting you but like I have never done that type of work,” yeah so I’m—I was sort of over here doing my own thing but all of a sudden, like, knowing all these people and kind of rooting for them or still I guess in somewhat of the same way as I did on Strap-On trying to just, yeah, commentate and offer advice and sort of occasionally say something smart, but I’m quite aware that I’m now—laughter] now significantly older so I—I’m at the point where I’m in more of a danger of being a fuddy-duddy than just a slightly older cool kid.

O'Brien: Um, there’s been a lot of news around Gamergate and 4chan and sort of dramatic and explosive gender politics in the gaming—game industries, and most of that news has not—that I’ve seen, has not included any mention of trans women to speak of. Could you describe how the Queer Game Scene and trans women in gaming is fitting within the kind of broader picture of changing gender politics...in gaming?

Clark: Um within the broader picture...so, it's all the same people—

O'Brien: Yeah

Clark: It's the same crowd of people that that are—have been in the crosshairs of the Gamergate stuff. Not all of those people are trans. Some of them—a lot of them are queer, and it's often not really mentioned, and um—yeah as part of the narrative. There are a bunch of people who were sort of in the, like, primary targets of that Gamergate, kind of reactionary, troll movement who are trans women and I don't know, it's—it's funny because of—there were sort of two different types of articles in the [laughter] sort of 2013 2014 window. There were a bunch of articles that are about, “Oh look. All of the—these diverse people are making games now, including like all of these queer games. Games about—by women, games about—by people with—struggling with mental health issues who are talking about their experiences,” and those were, a lot of the games that generated this huge backlash, but the other type of story, where it was like, “These angry trolls are sort of coming
after women,” tended to elide the—the part that like, was about, “Oh these women are queer or trans—

O'Brien: [inaudible]

Clark: —or they're in close community with queer and trans women.” Um, they're all sort of part of a—a distributed, but like really tight on the Internet together kind of like circle of people on—on Twitter who like see each other at—at game conferences and festivals, kind of who are—form an artistic community, that was targeted by these attacks and a lot of the—yeah a lot of the—the way it was portrayed in the media was like, “Oh these—these poor women are being victimized,” yeah and didn’t really kind of go more into like what the nature of the community—

O'Brien: That's so interesting

Clark: —that were—were making things was, uh and—yeah and it's—of course it's not that—you can't just sort of say like, “They were only targeting trans people or only targeting queer women.” They were, you know, scattershot—they—they came after my game for a little bit. I was kind of like, you know, more of a nearby target, but this game right here which is a uh—

O'Brien: What is it?

Clark: It's a game called Consentacle, about negotiating sex between a human being and an alien.

O'Brien: [laughter]

Clark: And um—yeah and so this is sort of my—my queer politics game and that—that game too was sort of targeted for a little while in this broad sweep of like, trolls, coming after whoever they could, really, you know, much more incidentally and without, a lot of impact on me compared to the people who were—who were very much in the center of the crosshairs, but it was all part of this—this pool, and I really see it as a—a very immediate, reactionary strike against games getting very diverse in a lot of ways, that was happening immediately prior, which wasn't just about women making games, it was about—yeah, about queers making games and trans women making games, and women writing games criticism too. I think that that was a big part of it um and—yeah and so it's—it's not like—yeah you don't get the full story—on all of that stuff.

O'Brien: That's very helpful.

Clark: Mhmm. And it's—it's definitely devastated that community. A lot of people sort of left and stopped making or writing about games afterwards. It was like, you know, having a—a
virtual and thus less physically harmful kind of, um pogrom, or, you know like a—a rampage of—of angry men coming through the streets like breaking the windows of your community and so a lot of people were like, “I’m out of here.” Other people were like, “I’m going to kind of lay low for a while, but stick around,” but it’s—yeah it—it was pretty bad, yeah.

O’Brien: Is there more you’d like to say about your life as a game designer and a game design community and the trans and queer politics of that?

Clark: Um, I think I’ve been extraordinarily lucky, in part because I’m here in New York, which is kind of at the edge of the game industry, strangely enough. It’s like we’re not in the center, which is like over in Silicon Valley, and so we have a slightly different, slightly weirder, slightly smaller-scale form of game development that happens here and as a result, and I think it’s because it’s a big metropolitan area with a lot of—a lot of queers and trans people here, I haven’t really had to deal with a lot of transphobia or discrimination, in the context of my work, uh and I’m—I constantly feel really, really fortunate and lucky and—and also grateful for that, even though, you know a lot of the—a lot of the people that I’ve worked with and been mentored by over the years, have been White, straight, cis guys, right? Your sort of like typical face in the game industry, but because—because of the—the place that they occupy in the bigger cultural sphere of games, where they’re a little bit more—they’re a little bit more like, against the totalizing, capitalist politics of the game marketplace or they have a slightly more artistic bent or they’re just scrabbling to do more marginalized forms of works I’ve generally found like, there—there are very few of those types of—those like sort of straight, White, cis guy um in—in the New York little game scene that are—are horrible bigots. Um yeah there are—have been—I’ve encountered so little of that, that I’m kind of astonished and I feel super fortunate and yeah, I mean I feel grateful to individuals and I almost feel weird being like, “Oh professionally I’m really indebted to all these straight, White, cis guys,” because that’s kind of who there was—when I showed up, but they were—they were always like really good to me and never made any kind of big deal about me being a—you know, a half-Japanese, queer, trans woman and they were all just very, very cool and so I guess I feel lucky. It’s like I get to be part of a slightly, you know—yeah slightly indie or alt, slightly more artsy, nerdy cultural scene that—that kind of just accepted as a given from the beginning of like, “Of course we’re not going to be homophobic or racist or—or transphobic,” which is definitely not the case everywhere, right? But uh—so I’ve—I’ve been very lucky to be here and that—that’s probably what I most think about at that intersection.

O’Brien: Uh, in closing do you want to give a slightly broader picture of your life right now: your family life or your social dynamics at the moment.

Clark: Well I guess other than the fact that we all live in a increasingly fascist kelptocracy, I—I’m really—I think I’m in a phase of settling down. I’m in my 40s now and I—I’m not out at queer dance parties as much as I used to be. I got married last year which is something that like, you know ten years ago, I might not have imagined doing, and—yeah and—and I was able to, with a lot of savings and with my wife, get a—buy a home in Sunset Park so I feel like
I'm really—you know I've become like, a solidly middle-class professional. It's kind of a weird transformation from a few years ago when I was like, I— I sort of barely had a home at some points, and was just doing a lot of freelance work to get by and was like, rapidly draining my bank account, but now I'm— yeah, I'm sort of like—I—I've been stabilizing for a couple years and kind of, yeah getting out of— yeah having like better mental health practices and stuff like that too and, yeah building a foundation which I can try to—I don't know, keep—keep helping people. I'm doing a lot more helping students these days and I've found it's like, “Well of course that's what you're supposed to do if you're a professor,” but it both takes up a lot more time and energy and is more, sort of gratifying than I would have imagined before coming to work full-time. I had been teaching as an adjunct for a while, but—but now I'm like, “Oh that's like actually a pretty big deal, big responsibility. It's where I should be putting a ton of my energy.” Um, yeah I'm fortunate that I have like a bunch of interesting weirdos for students here too from a lot of different backgrounds, so yeah. Life is pretty good for me, at least in my little, tiny local sphere, even though there's some horrible stuff happening more widely and yeah, but I'm, you know, continuing to work on political response for that both in the organization work I keep doing and the protests I keep going to. The Supreme Court [of the United States] amicus curiae briefs that I contribute tiny bits too, like that just happened yesterday and um—yeah and then also—yeah the kinds of games that I'm making and my students are making.

O'Brien: Thank you.