

national impact. And I was in this relationship with Joan that was extremely difficult — Joan Biren, or JEB. And again, I don't want to say too much about the particulars of it. Some of that can be seen in some of the short pieces from *S/He*, but I can say two things, I think, ethically. One is that all along, the relationship was troubled by the fact that I was not in recovery, either around drinking or around being the child who had come out of an alcoholic family. So there were dynamics in the relationship that I contributed to that I didn't understand were there and that I couldn't stop, I didn't know how to stop. And so, toward the end of that relationship, I got into 12-step recovery programs, specifically into ACOA [Adult Children of Alcoholics].

And I just want to stop a minute here and say to any researcher who might be using this tape, that the policy of the — I'm talking about recovery because this is a personal history for the archives — but the policy of the program is anonymity at the level of press and media, and so I would like researchers to honor that. And if they're going to write about this, just say that I, you know, was in recovery around being, or took steps to remedy my childhood patterns around being a child of an alcoholic family. That's the principle of the program. And I would like researchers to honor that.

Anyway, I started that [process.] I gained a lot from it — really, really helpful. And, uh, right about the same time, emerging in the D.C. community was a more complex conversation around butch and femme. And it was a spinoff of all the turmoil that had gone around Barnard and around the sex wars. How do we talk about these things. What even are we talking about? You know, the Carole Vance anthology had come out —

ANDERSON: Uh-hm. Probably one of Joan Nestle's books.

PRATT: No.

ANDERSON: Not yet?

PRATT: Well, yes. Right about that time, but there's another one there. There are two: *Pleasure and Danger*, and then there's the other one —

ANDERSON: *Passion and Power*?

PRATT: I can't remember. Anyway, and —

16:00

ANDERSON: Ann Snitow?

PRATT: Right. Ann Snitow. That anthology had come out. So that was this accumulation of conversation, you know, that was going on that I had seen, read, and been a part of. And there was a group [femme] meeting — I was not part of it — to talk about butch-femme stuff. I think Joan might have been part of it, I'm not sure about that. I can't quite

remember. And as part of that, but not locally, but rather nationally, that dialogue was developing, Leslie came to D.C. to speak. She came because it was happening on a national level, and she was part of that, and she has a whole story about a big forum that was held in New York where she spoke as a transgender lesbian, and it was one of those moments where things broke through.

So, she came to D.C. There was a Workers World branch in D.C. They sponsored it. It was a slideshow that she had been developing for many years that was the germ of the book that later became *Transgender Warriors*. I went because everybody in my group, social circle, lesbian social circle, was going because it was about these gender issues that people were talking about. You know, this group that was talking about butch-femme stuff — they were talking about dildos. They were talking about sex toys. You know, there was open conversation going on about fucking and at a level that had not been there ever before. And so they were all going.

And what was very interesting about it was this was the lesbian feminist cultural establishment, so to speak. I mean, Nancy Polikoff, who now is, like, the — I don't know — international authority on lesbian custody cases, right? She's a lawyer at AU. It was before she was a mother. There was a maybe-baby group also in D.C. and so a lot of the women in that group became mothers and some of the women from that group overlapped with this discussion as well. And so, they were all there.

By that point in time, Joan had broken up with me. She had moved out and about five months later, she broke up with me. We were living in a house on Franklin Street in D.C., in the Northeast part of D.C., and she had left. It was very difficult, but now, of course, I'm glad she left, but it was very hard at the time. And she had broken up with me and she was going to be at this — I assumed that she'd be at this gathering because everybody was there. I went with somebody that I was not dating, but was sort of hanging out with, Michelle Zavos, at the time, who was another lesbian lawyer who[se] lover had broken up with her and we were sort of going to things together a little bit. And I didn't want to talk to Joan. I really didn't want to talk to her. And she was in the audience, kind of like (gestures "hi"), and I was, like, I don't want to talk to you.

So I was sitting up in the back area of the Marie Reed Center. It's graduated seating, and Leslie was giving her slideshow. But actually, right beforehand, I had met her. Somebody asked me to show her the way to the auditorium. So, it's very interesting. I remember meeting her, very handsome, great shirt. I don't think she had a tie on. No, I don't think she had a tie on. I remember that first moment where I saw her as more slight and smaller than I ever, ever remember again feeling that she was. It was an interesting moment. I remember seeing her and perceiving her as a slight butch lesbian. Thin, but slight, I think might be the word. And I've never again seen her that way. Very, very interesting, having to do with the power of the self.

20:00

But, you know, we had this meaningless, sort of, you know, how to get to the auditorium — we have a routine we do around this, you know, meeting each other. She has her side of it and I have my side of it and we tell it as a duet, and we enjoy that. But she read the “Letter to a ’50s Fem” at that talk before she did the slideshow. And I had already read it in the anthology, so the anthology was out. And what was important about that moment with her reading it was that when I had read it on the page — I didn’t understand that that was my story until I heard her reading it as a butch speaking it.

So she read this story and as she read it, I visualized involuntarily, just visualized, these moments in my life that corresponded to the moments in this story. Like I remember my lover Cris after she was raped and how I went and took her bloody clothes and washed them and mended them. I’ve even written a poem about it. And I knew that the reason Cris was raped was because she was a butch lesbian. I knew all this stuff, but I hadn’t put it in a larger context of the history of lesbians and butches and the bars and the women’s movement. I just hadn’t put it — I hadn’t seen my life as part of this narrative, even though I was living it, exactly living it. And yet, I listened to her and I saw my own life [as a femme.] I mean, I saw these moments in my own life. They were there. They corresponded.

So I left. I got out of there. I didn’t want to talk to Joan. And Michelle and I went to a party and before we went into the party, we had this long discussion about what we’d just heard, because Leslie wasn’t talking just about butch and femme, of course. She was trying to explain transgender to us, using these pictures and putting [them] into a context of historical materialism, right, and saying, it’s not just about passing for economic reasons, it’s more complicated than that. You know, she was really lifting us to the next level of theoretical understanding.

24:00

And I began to understand that night that — I had already sort of begun to understand it, but I really began to understand that night, that our theoretical tools had been limited. Now, when I say I had sort of begun to understand it — because this rumbling, this development was happening, I had actually already started writing these pieces for *S/He* before that evening. I had already begun them.

And I had had this brief — well, not brief, well, yes, brief — but I was in the middle of having an affair with a lesbian philosopher (laughs), Marilyn Frye. I was having — this is definitely not known anywhere. I was having this summer affair with Marilyn Frye. And it is sort of interesting because the two paths couldn’t be any more sort of starkly evident than an affair with someone who had been a lesbian separatist, essentially, and had tried to box her way out of that, not very successfully but had attempted to — and Leslie, you know. I mean, there were my two paths. One was a continuation, really, of my life with Joan, ideologically, right, and another was going back to — and I say back in a good way — forward to, back to, you know, this expansion into the world, taking sexuality issues, gender issues, and bringing them

back into the larger movement, into struggles against class oppression and racism and everything. That was Leslie.

So, I was having this affair with Marilyn, very intense little affair, and um, so I had started writing these pieces. And I went to this party with Michelle. Beforehand, we sat in the car and we talked about these concepts, and about butch and femme, and Michelle identified as a butch and her ex-partner had been a femme, and she started talking about what it meant to her as a butch to be in a relationship with a femme. It was very beautiful and very moving, about — it was so *not* about domination. It was so not about any of these ideas that people have about it. It was about where she could go, being herself with someone who was being themselves as a femme. You know, it was about the place that you could go in that sort of dynamic interaction, and how thrilling that was. And so that was a wonderful moment. I wasn't — you know, Michelle was not anyone I had thought of at all as being a possible partner. So it was maybe even more meaningful to hear it from her, you know, just an objective reporting from the butch side of things, of what it might be like. And not what I had been hearing from Joan.

ANDERSON: Or Marilyn.

28:43

PRATT: At all. Or Marilyn, at all, both of whom were very conflicted about my femininity and about my feminism, and about themselves, you know, about their own stuff. Or at least, that's how I experienced it. So it was a house party. It was a D.C. house party. African American women, white women, all lesbians — raunchy, raunchy, raunchy. You know, great music and porn movies on downstairs, lesbian porn movies, and women looking and saying, How come all these women have long fingernails? That is not right. And us doing — and I've written about this — doing this circle thing where all the femmes will get in a circle and put a butch in the middle and say, OK, how butch is she? and rank them, and us saying a seven, and the butch saying, "No way, I'm a ten. I do not accept a seven."

And that was the moment we were breaking through to talking openly, socially, about our sexual and gender selves. And a lot of that, like we've said, you know, came out of the bars again, these gatherings. These are not — even in the early '90s, it was not like we were women who didn't go to the bars or hadn't come out of the bars, you know. Mostly, these were women in their 30s and 40s. And so, we were bringing forward what we knew of ourselves and we were being able to articulate it. And it was great. It was great.

And I stayed at the party till, like, four in the morning — totally untypical of me — went home, went to sleep, got up, went upstairs to where my office was in this house, and I had a message from Leslie on the phone, on my message machine. And I listened to it, and I just started shaking, really, and uh, I knew it was a very important message, and I actually wrote it down in my journal, word for word, and marked it for inflection, so I wouldn't forget how it sounded. I wasn't at the

point where I understood I should just save the tape. I learned that later, you know, I regret that, but I have it written down. And after I listened to it several times, I just started crying and I cried for about two or three hours.

32:00

And why did it have that impact on me? For the first time in my life, I had someone who was my sexual desire. Even though I wasn't thinking of Leslie as a potential partner at all, not in the slightest, but I knew from the night before that she stood in that place where others had stood. So the first time [I heard] someone who stood in that place in relation to me as a butch lesbian speak to me with incredible respect and recognition of who I was, and none of my partners had ever been able to do that. They had never recognized me. They had never consciously verbally articulated, I know who you are. I respect you. I love you. I mean, she didn't say, I love you. She talked about how much it meant to her that a femme from the old days was in the audience and how shaken she was by that and how the way I reacted to her reading the "Letter to a 50s Femme" that she didn't know if I had seen that she was reading it to me. She could see that I was responding as one who understood. So, she had already felt that recognition from me and she was giving it back to me in a completely respectful way. There was nothing sexual about this message. Nothing. She didn't even leave her phone number. And later, I found out that that was deliberate, because she didn't want to seem to be coming on any kind of smarmy kind of way.

ANDERSON: She just needed to share that.

34:00

PRATT: She just needed to just say, "I saw you. I know you." And I think it was important to her that it was in that context of the lesbian cultural feminist that I was there and I was connecting to her. Because that was the movement that she'd been closed out of. When we talk about the people who have been shut out of women's liberation, Leslie was it, even though she never wanted to take herself out of it, you know, and she has been completely committed to women's liberation at every step. Every step, and yet it was closed to her, you know. There are many things she can say about how that was for her.

So, the fact that I was there and I was connecting to her as part of that milieu was really meaningful to her. We knew each other on a level that had been denied to us before. And by knowing, I don't mean just about butch and femme, it was really about the whole spectrum of woman, of person in struggle, you know, of sexuality and desire, of gender expression. We knew each other. And I'd never had that before from anyone. Never. To be given that. You can't achieve that alone. To fully come into yourself, you have to, at some point, have the world recognize that. You can't hold — you know, you just can't do it by yourself. That's why we have a movement.

But she gave it to me on a personal level, and of course, as the result of all these movements. And as we said, we talked about this, actually some years back, when a German film crew came to interview us here,

from the German gay and lesbian movement, and they asked us to describe that moment, and we said, in that kind of duet that we do, that it was like having been stranded in a strange land for your whole life, not having seen anybody from home, and suddenly, someone that you've never seen before comes and you see them, and you know each other. You know each other from this really deep, old place of longing. And that's what happened. That's what happened for us.

I cried for three hours. I thought, What is happening to me? I did. I just thought, What is happening to me? What is happening to me? I didn't understand it. I didn't understand it. Of course, then the years since have been the understanding of it. And the writing *S/He* has been the understanding of it, of going back through my life, of understanding transgender oppression, of understanding why I as someone who is not transgender could be so deeply connected to that struggle, out of my place in women's liberation. Out of the place of someone who felt how deeply oppressed I was as a lesbian woman, and what transgender liberation can offer me and all of us. So years, sort of, out of that moment, I immediately wrote to Leslie. Well, I didn't immediately. I got her address from the organizer and I wrote to her and I said, "Thank you so much for your message and I just want to explain something, which is that I'm not a femme from the old days, because" blah-blah-blah, you know, women's, you know, lesbian feminist movement, you know. And, uh, I hand wrote it but I kept a copy.

ANDERSON: Oh, you're good.

38:45

PRATT: I hand wrote my letters to Marilyn and I have a copy of all them, too. Like I said to you, you know, I had enough in my life under segregation of the blotting out of history. It's not going to happen with my life, not going to happen with my life. So, she wrote back and she said — I can't remember exactly what I put in the letter, but maybe I talked [about] coming out in the bars in Fayetteville and — I don't know everything that I said in that letter, but over the course of our corresponding, she said to me — I must have told her about the raids on the bars in Fayetteville and how there was a back door and how we had to sign in and, you know, into the bar, because supposedly they gave the list of names to the police and so you always signed in as somebody else — I mean, there's all this stuff around the bars, and I must have told her all that. And so, she wrote back and said, "Honey, anybody who knows about the back door in the bars is a femme from the old days."

And of course, that was another moment in my life of where I thought, Oh, I have these overlapping worlds, and it was my understanding my own history. It was a moment where I understood my own history in the movement, that I came out of old gay life, I came out of lesbian feminism, I came out of women's liberation. I came out of all these places. They aren't separate places. They overlap. They overlapped in our lives. Different of us took those moments, those overlapping currents, we took them in different directions, you know,

different ways, but it's not that they were separate when we were doing them. We extended them in different ways.

So, I kept writing. I got to know her. We had a long correspondence, very old-fashioned. Talked on the phone. I well remember my first phone call with her, we laughed all the time. We just laughed and laughed. I don't even remember what we were laughing about. I just remember that we laughed a lot with each other. And that's pretty much how that's been. We've laughed a lot with each other. We have a great time together.

I do remember the first question she ever asked me, which was — maybe not the first question — the question I remember, which was, “How do the people in your town make a living?” Centreville. “How do people in your town make a living?” And I remember how excited I was. I don't mean intellectually. I just mean, ohhhh. I can talk about this. It was thrilling. Another one of those moments, like, Oh, she really wants to know about what it was like there, and I had a lot to say. And I didn't even know I had so much to say about how we made a living and how people made a living, all the different levels and ways and stuff around racism, and I just knew so much. And no one had cared. Nobody had cared, you know. A lot of what I did was deal with people around their anti-Southern stuff and their ignorance of the fighting history of the South and of — not just the struggle history but just the specifics. Like you know very well, people who think northern Virginia isn't the South, or people who don't understand the difference between North Carolina and South Carolina, or Alabama and Mississippi, or Kentucky and Tennessee, and how, you know, the economics of the region and the different ways that plays out — and I knew all this stuff, and I didn't know what I knew. But Leslie was a communist, and she knew how to get to it.

ANDERSON: How important it was, and how important it was in shaping who you were.

PRATT: Yes.

ANDERSON: OK. I'm going to put in a new tape.

END DVD 8

43:20

DVD 9

ANDERSON: That's a given.

PRATT: That's a given, you know, the writing part is a given. So, let's do the '90s.

ANDERSON: OK. So, this will be our last tape.

PRATT: This is our last tape and, I think, in an odd kind of way, it's less complicated, or maybe it just feels less complicated right now, but. So, I got to know Leslie, and I've talked some about this pattern I have around the personal and the political around my relationships, and what I was feeling at the time in Washington was the limits of national politics. And how I had developed an analysis around racism and around racism on the national scene, but I didn't really have an idea of how to fit that in with international struggle. Now, other people within women's liberation had gone on to do that, you know, in the NGOs, I mean Charlotte [Bunch], and even, uh, Mab to some extent, had, you know, traveled to Nicaragua, and — I hadn't done that. I had been much more within the lesbian feminist cultural circles, and I was feeling my limitation.

So, um, I got to know Leslie. I connected to her around gender issues first. I kept writing *S/He*. I had — you know, *Crime Against Nature* had come out. *Rebellion* had come out. I was writing *S/He* and, uh, we went through some time of a long-distance relationship but after about, almost, I don't know, it wasn't a year but it was maybe nine months or so, I understood I didn't want to do that. It was part of my recovery, of knowing that, because of the damage that had been done to me around my alcoholic family and around the stuff with my children, that I had protected myself by having distant relationships. You know, it was both a way to control pain and also to hopefully hold it off. And so, I thought, OK, I don't want to do that anymore. I'm ready to have a close-up relationship with somebody in a recovered way.

And Leslie was somebody who understood living sober, also, and that was very hopeful to me, that I was choosing someone who understood that. And so, we had a discussion about how we would do that. Would she move to D.C.? Would I move to New York? Would we move to a third city? We had a long extended discussion about how to do it, and then decided that I would come up to New York. And partly around the fact that she had a very, a very good network here. And as a transgender person, she needed a good network, and that moving to Washington without that network was very difficult thing to offer her. And then, there was also political work as well.

ANDERSON: And D.C. had kind of run its course for you, it sounds like.

3:50

PRATT: And D.C. had run its course for me, also, and I felt that. I felt like politically, I'm sort of at the end here, so, I moved up to New York. I moved to Jersey City. I moved to this apartment with her. We've been here for 12 years, on this corner, in this neighborhood, 147 Chestnut Street, the corner of Chestnut and Pavonia, right behind St. Joseph's Church and convent, right across the street from Salim and Mary's little deli. And I think the best way to characterize these 12 years, I think it would be truthful to say, that I have used these 12 years to explore politically and in my writing what it means to be an antiracist, anti-imperialist woman as part of women's liberation who still wants revolution, you know. What does that mean? It is where I started out, trying to find that path, and what I did when I moved up here is I would go to Workers World meetings with Leslie, you know, educationals, and read the paper.

ANDERSON: She was already involved with Workers World by then?

PRATT: Oh, she's been — yeah, she's been part of Workers World for many years and talks about that, since her young adulthood in Buffalo. I lived with her. I wrote. I had a job at an alternative graduate school called the Union Institute, where I no longer work because they fell into financial and organizational disarray. But I had that work. I was able to support myself doing that work. And I traveled. I continued to travel and speak. I explored gender issues. I finished writing *S/He*, and I attempted to educate myself as a Marxist.

I mean, I attempted to get a Marxist education, which I had never had. When I say that I had never had it, I had tried to grapple with these issues at the very beginning. I can remember, for instance, being in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and going to the library and looking for material on women in socialism, and the only thing I could find in the library was how socialism has failed women. And there's a book called *How Socialism Has Failed Women*. And it's all about the failure, you know, all about the supposed failure of the socialist states around women's issues — very anticommunist, very limited in its perspective.

And, as I said earlier, I was also part of the tail end of the women's liberation movement where women had already sort of moved on, you know, left the left behind, and were, if they considered themselves socialists, were autonomously socialist without a party. So they considered themselves socialist feminist, but, like, what did that mean? I couldn't even figure out what that meant, you know. I mean, there was no — there was just nothing going on. That current of women had, like, Margo Okazawa-Rey, who was in the Combahee River Collective with Barbara, they considered themselves socialist. They had some understanding of what that meant, but I wasn't getting any of that. It was just sort of around.

And there was writing but everything in my organizing life and in my social life and my social circles was sort of carrying me in this other direction so that I didn't — I sort of leaned that way and I sort of leaned

ANDERSON: It's so beautiful.

PRATT: I feel like this mirror has seen me grow up, from being a very, very little girl until now. I've been in this mirror with myself. So, I'm very attached to it as a witness to my life. And we just got this quilt ladder. We're slowly accumulating quilts. My mother gave me this one. A woman in Centreville made it. This is a Native Star quilt from Pine Ridge. And my mother made this one when she was a young woman. She made this one. This belle in her bonnet and her parasol. I know. And this is our mantle. We just added this star. We found it in the West Village just the other day.

And this is something that Leslie gave me when we were first together. It's a little gingerbread house and it has [written on it] Palace of Truth: Inquire Within. When we were first together, she quoted Radclyffe Hall's lover-partner-wife, to me, and Radclyffe Hall went to Una [Troubridge] and said, when she was about to publish *The Well of Loneliness*, "It's going to change our lives and I want to know how you feel about that." And Una said to her, "I only want to live with you in the palace of truth." So, that's where we live. We try, anyway, to live in the palace of truth.

And these are the books that I'm reading now because I'm working on these poems. I pull my rocking chair up to the windows sometimes and I look out over New York and I read these various books. George Oppen. Julia De Burgos. Lola Ridge. John Wheelwright. Frederic Engels. Karl Marx. *Writing Red: Women Writers, 1930-1940. Yiddish Song*.

ANDERSON: And there's the stunning view.

PRATT: And there's the view. There's the view, looking down on Jersey City. This is my corner, Chestnut and Summit. Well, Chestnut and Pavonia, actually. We're a block from Summit, a couple of blocks from Summit. And this is the turnpike and Jersey City and then the towers of Wall Street West rising at the edge of Jersey City. The capital sort of comes over to our side of the river. This is our view.

ANDERSON: We are [thinking] about capitalism all the time, right?

PRATT: No kidding. And these poems that I'm working on, they have these views from the window. I have poems that are happening out in the streets and then we have these moments where I'm here in the apartment and I'm looking imaginatively farther than I can see, and this view of capitalism is definitely there in those moments.

ANDERSON: OK. Let's turn it off.

PRATT: OK. We get to see where we are and that's it. And the film lasted this long.

ANDERSON: Yes. Thank you.

PRATT: Thank you.

7:03

END DVD 10

END INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Luanne Jette.

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