

moved to Brooklyn. It was — In many ways, it was like being a grown-up kid, because I had been such a foot soldier for the revolution for so long, and suddenly I moved to New York. We got this enormous apartment in Brooklyn for very cheap. It was a nightmare making it habitable for human beings.

ANDERSON: You've got a great story about all that — the work parties.

ALLISON: A series of things like that. But then, for a Southern writer to move to New York, it's almost very, very magical. I mean, I remember getting the little guidebook, the literary guide to New York, and going to see the house where Auden had lived and where Tennessee Williams had been. They lived with the stripper — I've forgotten her name — Gypsy Rose Lee, in that big old house. And going to the Lower East Side and going to readings and, oh man.

And then going to the New School and studying anthropology. It was like I had been living on what was essentially a kibbutz or a communist retreat for all those years. And working at a pace in which I never had any personal time, and got very little of my personal writing done in D.C. and Tallahassee, doing so much work for the revolution, and writing a kind of writing that was not what I was gifted at. I don't write good theory. My mind doesn't work like that.

ANDERSON: You're not polemical.

ALLISON: No, and I find it really tedious, and my sense of humor is perverse enough that it gets in the way. Going back to writing stories and poetry was so luxurious, and, at the same time, induced so much guilt, because it was self-indulgent. I mean, there are ways in which I had been trained to be a revolutionary, a foot soldier for the revolution. I was serious. So when I was invited to join *Conditions*, which was a wonderful lesbian literary magazine with a very strong political analysis, that was marvelous. It was like, Oh, I can do both. I can do this writing that I'm just beginning to get a handle on, and work with great editors and do what I believe in.

And that's the thing: do what I believe in. Because more and more, I had thought deeper and more deeply about the fact that, how do people genuinely change? How do cultures genuinely change? There's an enormous amount of stuff that you change through law, and then there is an enormous amount of stuff that you change through education. There were ways in which always working on feminist publications, which I had done consistently for a decade, was about education, and to a certain extent about advancing an analysis, although that was not my gift. But this was just — all of a sudden the doors opened, and I could think more freely about things that I avoided thinking about, or letting myself think too closely about.

Some of it was personal, about relationships, because when your collective breaks up, that meant that the protective system of being in a

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collective relationship broke up. It meant I could be — I could get myself in trouble. I could get in real relationships with women, and since I was always attracted to difficult butch women, that meant difficult butch-femme relationships. But it just opened up so much. It was like I got drunk on freedom for a good year.

And stepping into the New School and anthropology — oy vey. (laughs) I love anthropology. I actually love the New School. I love the people that I met there. I love Rayna Rapp and Shirley Lindenbaum and, oh my God, Stanley Diamond. And I loved that work, and all the reading and the study. But meanwhile, especially with a lot of the younger professors, I was “that lesbian feminist.” I can remember being in classes and being, Well, what’s the feminist position on this? And having to articulate — That was a pain in the ass. But it was so different from what I had been doing. It was still very, very freeing.

Conditions was the best of it. There were just wonderful, extraordinary women, and there were a lot of shared assumptions and shared understanding of what we were about and what the purpose of such a publication was. I didn’t have to fight as I had had to fight at *Quest* and *Amazing Grace*, and all the other publications I’d ever worked with, because *Conditions* had the same understanding about how the world changes. The world changes through story. The world changes through personal interaction. Education, yes, but it becomes more powerful and more effective if you make those personal connections, and there’s nothing more personal than story.

I understand so much more about the world, growing up on James Baldwin and Flannery O’Connor. If I had not had them, I’m scared of who I would be. That was such a common assumption at *Conditions*. We wanted to publish story that would change the world. Lesbian story, working-class story, women of color story. And do it in a way that honored the writers, which meant editing and taking it all seriously. In a lot of feminist publications, that whole concept was embattled.

And then I made friends, with great difficulty, (laughs) because we were all serious politicals. You’ve got to keep that in mind. So I can remember the first meeting, at which I can’t even remember all the names of the women who joined at the same time I did, but Cheryl Clarke and Jewelle Gomez, because we became very close friends, but not in the beginning. In the beginning, when we were sitting at this meeting and it was the previous editors — Irena Klepfisz and Jan Clausen and Elly Bulkin, really amazing people. They bring us all in and, We have picked you, to invite you to join the collective, and we want you to work together, and we want to set this system up.

But they were transitioning. All those people actually wanted to retire as editors and put a new editorial board in place, which was marvelous and wise and feminist of them. They put together a mixed bunch of people who were not going to get along, and we had to work it out. I mean, I was suddenly working with Yankee black women, and they looked at me like, Who is this cracker? And I’m like, Ooh, they’re

going to eat me alive. And, pretty much, some of that happened. It was a hard transition to get to know each other, learn to trust each other. But we learned it doing the work and discovering that we all loved the work and took the work entirely seriously.

Some of it was very, very painful. One of the people who joined the collective had a secret drug problem that became awful. And we all loved her. And that struggle got awful and did not end well. That also pushed us into becoming friends.

And then, oddly enough, we were all butch-femme, but in different contexts. Butch-femme in the black community — much more stringent than some of what I had come out of in my lackadaisical working-class white girl way. But Jewelle and I discovered quickly that we were attracted to problematic, interesting butch girls. Had different sexuality and different fetishes, but we liked them problematic, difficult butch girls. I would see who she was attracted to, and I'm like, Ooh, this is going to be bad; but it's going to be fun to watch. And she could do the same thing with me, and we became friends. Sometimes also about the work, because I loved the poetry she was writing, and I could share work with Jewelle, and we became much closer. It was hard for me to become close with Cheryl, she was so butch and did a very different kind of work.

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It was very rich, so that when trouble started happening — and trouble started happening way before Barnard, because I was in a phase in which there was all this freedom, and I was confrontive. Jewelle was always supportive and always fully present in my life, and has been to this day. So that when the blowups happened, and it was suddenly expensive to be my friend, she didn't back up at all, which was wonderful. It made a huge difference. It made me feel less crazy, and cemented the friendship on many levels. She did not feel played, but maybe because we were closer and I was more careful not to play her.

And we pushed each other as writers. Both of us believed in writing as a way to change the world. Both of us believed in pushing ourselves to do the work we were most afraid of. That was great, to have someone pushing me that way. And I made more friends for whom that was the case.

New York was such a — there's so many feminisms, there's so many communities. Because I lived in Brooklyn, I worked in Midtown Manhattan, got the job at *Poets & Writers* — lied to get it.

ANDERSON: What did you lie about?

ALLISON: Oh, everything. (laughs) Well, I was at the New School full time, but I was doing evening classes. They had this opening, so I went — a girlfriend set me up to go apply for the job. They were just beginning to realize that a lot of their systems were not going to work, and they needed to change. This was just before computers came in, but they were basically list-maintenance people. They kept all these directories of writers and directories of resources, and there was an enormous

clerical staff, and I simply said, “Oh, I know how to do all this, I’ve done this.” And I lied about what I had done at *Quest*, because I had never done any list maintenance at *Quest*, but I needed a job. And I knew for a fact I could learn anything really fast. And they were desperate. I had no idea how desperate or, in fact, how little they knew about what they needed.

So I got the job as an assistant to the director of the information center, and she became a good friend. She was a poet, and she only lasted a few months before she said, “This is an impossible job,” and quit. And suddenly, I’m the director.

Then I had to learn how to run computers, which I did by going down to a computer store and pretending I was going to buy one, and they’d train you. I learned that if you — you can lie so long as you would quickly cover the lie. So I learned how to do it, and I kept that job the entire time I was in New York, working in an arts organization with limited funding, not that well paid.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Good benefits, but not that well paid. But they didn’t make me wear nice clothes, which was good because I didn’t have the money to buy any. And they let me complete my degree while doing it.

And there were other writers. That was really great, because all of a sudden I was inhabiting the different communities of writers. Now, there are different feminist communities, there are different lesbian communities. There is a range of writers communities. At that point, stepping into what was an experimental, adventuresome writing community was really great for me, because on many levels, I’m a very conservative writer. I’m a very linear storyteller. It was just so rich.

But it was, and felt to me, profoundly selfish, because all of a sudden I was not primarily a foot soldier for the revolution anymore. I was primarily a writer. Still a foot soldier, still doing my bit, because there was maintenance in my life, and I believed in it. But making the choice, more and more, to go to poetry readings instead of community meetings. And making the choice, more and more, to write things, following the writing where it would take me rather than steering the writing to where I thought it needed to be to serve a feminist purpose.

There is not enough attention paid to how problematic and difficult that is, and how to become a good writer, boy. Being patient with being bad. We don’t teach each other these skills. But the *Conditions* collective was a place where those skills were respected and honored and encouraged. I still had to raise money. (laughs) Still had to raise money. I got an editorial award — it was \$5,000 — and it went right into printing the next issue of the magazine. You know, you never see any of that money. You feed it right back in.

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ANDERSON: What were you writing? Were you still doing poetry or short stories?

ALLISON: Oh, I've always written bad poetry. I'm not a good poet.

ANDERSON: Well, that was the only book of poetry you published, right?

ALLISON: Yeah. I write poems, but I don't publish much, and they change into stories. I was teaching myself to write stories and trying to figure out how to write a novel.

And I was working at *Poets & Writers*, which did not pay any overtime. It was a really embattled arts organization, a wonderful organization with great people. Paid no overtime, but they would pay comp time. There was an enormous amount of overtime when we were doing these directories, so I kept accumulating enormous amounts of comp time that could not be used because we were always embattled. Then there came a point where they were — I had three months of comp time that was going to go away if I didn't use it. And that changed my life because I was like, You know, the people who run this organization are nice people, but they're mostly rich, and I am poor. I'm not giving them three months of my life. And I took it.

ANDERSON: So you took a sabbatical.

ALLISON: I took a sabbatical, and a friend loaned me a place on Fire Island on the off-season, and I went out to Fire Island. At that point, I had been trying to write what became a story called "Gospel Song," and which was a section of the novel I was beginning to figure out that I wanted to write, but I never had enough time. I was writing after classes and on the subway and in the middle of the night. But I had three months in that freezing place out on Fire Island, and all of a sudden, what had been 12, 15 pages, became 60 pages. It was the first uninterrupted work time I had ever had.

It changed me completely as a writer — just a door into quiet. You don't get enough doors into quiet in an activist life. And while I felt deeply guilty, when I came back to New York, I threw myself into a rush of activism. Some of what happened with the Sex Mafia came out of my guilt of having stolen three months to write and pay my dues back, paying back the community by being more of an activist. I established the pattern of stealing that time and going away and writing, and learned to write.

And then finding people to share the work with that were critical. One of the issues in a lot of feminist publishing is you need the right kind of critical at the right time. Tricky, encouraging critical. Critical that takes the work seriously and pushes you to do it better. We don't get that enough. *Conditions* gave me that. Even though a lot of us were very different writers, the work that came out of it was wonderful.

I remember reading the first draft of *Narratives*, Cheryl's book. And I think some of my critiques of that were not useful, but I took it completely seriously, and that was useful. And reading *Flamingos and Bears*, Jewelle's book, and sharing those stories with them that I was

writing, and getting that same kind of serious attention that made demands on you. That's invaluable and profoundly feminist.

The thing we don't talk about is competition. Some of the unspeakables are career making, which I've tried to be matter-of-fact about. Some people in the feminist movement made solid successful careers; they got 401ks in return. But also competition. And as writers, we're not nice people. We all want to be great. And being great is not simple, sometimes not even possible. We genuinely tried to make each other better, and I think of that as the most profound feminist work a writer can do, is to give back to the other feminist writers, to make demands on each other, demands that honor what's possible, instead of being destructive. I know how to be destructive; I was raised in the Baptist church. It was wonderful, exhausting, and stimulating, and widened my grasp of what feminism and change were about.

ANDERSON: It sounds like you also started to shift in terms of your life perception, as not being a movement soldier. And that would be how you paid your bills and spent all your time, to imagine a life as a writer.

ALLISON: Well, and imagining living –

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: The thing that falls out of a lot of my conversations is I never thought I'd live long. I wasn't healthy, and I did have a tendency to get injured. But also, the history of my twenties and thirties was watching my aunts die. I'm the oldest living woman in my family, and we had an epidemic of cancer and high blood pressure and diabetes, all the diseases of the working poor in the South. My mother had cancer for 30 years. I always expected to die. My conviction was that I would die either of cancer — which I just keep an eye out for because I figure it's coming — or that one of my lovers would kill me, something my mother also was afraid of. Oh God.

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So I never thought I'd live long. And so I never planned for it, and I was willing to be a foot soldier. I'm going to die anyway. But there's a point at which you're thinking, I'm going to die anyway, maybe I can get this done before I die. I'm going to die anyway, but I'm going to leave this book. I'm going to get this book right. I'm going to get this story right. I'm going to get this poem right. I'm going to do something of use before I check out.

And then, at some point, it suddenly dawned on me that, by comparison to most of the women in my family, I'm astonishingly healthy. That's tricky, because I know why I'm healthy.

ANDERSON: Survivor's guilt.

ALLISON: Yeah, survivor's guilt is a killer. I went to college. Most of my cousins were pregnant at 15.

I just did this talk at the University of Wyoming and read a story that's really intricate and tricky and complicated and about being in a violent family, a different kind of story. At the end of it, this little boy stands up, and he says, "I know you write out of your family." And he's like, How did you not die? Why are you alive? Survivor's guilt? Big question.

I'm like, All right, I'll tell you the truth, I am alive because I'm a lesbian. And this is not something this culture understands or honors, but if I had been heterosexual like all my cousins, I'd be dead. About that I have no doubt. If I were still alive, I'd be living in a trailer park in Greenville, South Carolina, with a bunch of kids, some of whom would be dead. Because that's what I was raised to be. It's not about good or evil or justice. That is what I was supposed to do, and it's what would have happened. But because I was a baby dyke, I was not going to be pregnant at 15. It could have happened, because I was being raped fairly regularly, but I lucked out. I lucked out by getting syphilis at 12, so I'm sterile.

All of the places that mean I'm alive actually had some built-in cost to them, but they're costs that the women in my family pay regularly and die from. Early pregnancy is really destructive to your health. Alcoholism, drug addiction — no, you don't survive too long. But I read books and learned how to hide, which is how you survive in violent families.

I've always been guilty about it. I still am, but I recognize it. To know that and to write stories out of it and not hate yourself is a profoundly feminist act. But some of your motivation for doing things also comes out of the guilt. Looking at my family and seeing, you know, because I got appendicitis my freshman year in college and went to a doctor who realized that I had pelvic inflammatory disease and treated me for it — because that could have killed me if it had continued untreated. I lucked out by getting sick at 14 and getting antibiotics. Otherwise, I would have had syphilis, which is, you know, not a good diagnosis. Luck. I believe in luck, like the rest of the working class.

But maybe within the luck there's also purpose. Or you tell yourself there's a reason. There's a reason I'm alive and my cousin Billy's dead, and my mom is dead, and all my aunts are dead. All the women older than me that I looked to for a model are dead, and I've got to be the model.

ANDERSON: So your family came back full force in your life in the early 80s, with your mother's death.

ALLISON: Pretty much before, with Barnard. When the women's movement broke around me and my mother's cancer reoccurred, I went home.

ANDERSON: What was that like, to have that immediacy and to have your family back in your life? How did you do that?

ALLISON: I think the hard thing to explain is that it really did all happen in the same few months, and I was crazy, but I was not going to tell my mother about Barnard — not going to happen. I didn't discuss my sex life in any other than the most meager terms.

ANDERSON: Sure.

ALLISON: And she was in such bad shape. Her reoccurrence of cancer occurred at a moment when she was not ready to deal with it. She refused chemo and refused treatment. I went home because my sisters were hysterical and they knew she was going to die. I went home because I could persuade her to begin chemo again. And my mother bargained ruthlessly with me. She wanted to go home to visit her sister, my aunt Dot, a difficult trip all around because it had to be accomplished with my stepfather. Her deal with me is that she would resume chemo if I would come and make the drive. So in the months after Barnard, I went home, (laughs) got into a Pontiac convertible, and drank Pabst Blue Ribbon from Florida to Greenville.

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ANDERSON: Oh God.

ALLISON: We'd hit these Denny's, and Mom would get out, and they'd go eat, and I'd sit on the curb and drink. I'm like, Okay, I'm going to get through this. I'm not going to kill the son of a bitch. I'm not going to say anything, I'm just going to make this trip. Make this trip. Oh God. He never changed. He was always a monster.

But then we got to Greenville and spent four days with my mother and her sisters — my aunt Dot and my aunt Grace, the ones that were still alive — and I was reminded of who I was. The world I stepped into — that feminist revolutionary army — is a family, and it's a good family. It's got the flaws of a family and fucks up occasionally and fails you on occasion. Stepping back into my birth family when I was old enough not to hate them, was really important. Not that — There were places I hated them, and they were just — they were still themselves.

(laughs) Oh God. One of my cousins asked me to marry him while we were there. (laughter) "They said you were a little strange, but I think we got a connection." He was drunk, too. And then the stupid son of a bitch really thought that I would marry his ass. I'm like, You are my mother's sister's child. I'm not marrying you. Are you crazy? He was like, Well — He was such an idiot. He was a sweet boy, but he was a fool. But it was like one of these — My family is such a caricature. You guys are just — do you know how absurd you all are sitting on that porch?

Fortunately, by the time we hit Greenville and I was no longer having to be in the car with my stepfather, I stopped drinking and I could pay attention. I took a lot of pictures. Some of those pictures are just devastating. It was the last pictures before — Within two years,

most of those people were dead. My aunts died, my cousins, a bunch of them died. Cancer went through them like a wildfire.

But it was very strong. And then it was like, You know, everybody hates us, and there are some reasons why we were hateful, but there are some reasons why we were astonishing. I could do this; this is what I want to do. I want to make a story in which these people are honored and loved, and not reduced because they are sons of bitches. And they were, on some levels, really, really destructive and don't take care of each other. We should put that on the page fully. That's work reasonable to do. That's what I try to do. Some of my explanations of what I do are self-serving, but, hey, I'm a writer. I've got to have my myths.

My mother went back into chemo and lived another decade, entirely because I spent those three days in the car with my stepfather. Whoo, kicked my ulcer in again, but, hey, it bought her some time and bought me some time.

And by the time I came back to New York, I had a different stance for dealing with everything that was following on Barnard. And it was like, Don't fuck with us, we have shotguns. Going to fact meetings and the feminist anticensorship taskforce meetings with that stance was lifesaving. Because otherwise I was coming in damaged, you know, barely surviving being constantly assaulted. But instead I came back my mother's girl, which is, Who do you think you are? We have stood up against people who have hated us for centuries. We are hateful, we are contemptible. We do not die, you can't kill me.

That was really a positive thing, and it's out of that that I wrote all those poems. I invented the myth of us as indestructible, which is a myth because we're not, but it's useful, really useful. And remade the connections with my sisters, who had, by that time — thank God — gotten over their fundamentalist tendencies.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Oy, Baptist church is a pain in the ass. It gives you a lot of resources, but it can fuck you up.

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ANDERSON: So this is a really pivotal time in terms of your reconnection with your family.

ALLISON: I think it's about growing up.

ANDERSON: And the conviction and passion and your writing — it's changing.

ALLISON: Yeah. I wrote the poem, "The Women Who Hate Me," which was the way of — it was just like saying the beads. Okay, yeah, these are the reasons you hate me, these are the reasons I have always been hated. And these are the reasons why it doesn't destroy me, and these are the sources of strength and pride among people who are hated.

That was a real useful piece of work, personally useful, and made a connection with people who then — The thing about writing is that you put the work out in the world, and then it comes back. And what comes back are all those people who need what you have done, who are then going to do their own work and give you something back. It's a wonderful, resonating growth process, and it changes everything.

It changed me. It was what I could give when those people called in the middle of the night with the desperate I-don't-want-to-live-like-this, and reading poems into the phone was the only thing, sometimes, that worked. It didn't always work. My sources of strength are not everybody's sources of strength, and they don't have access. It worked for me, gave me some good stuff that I could do.

And then, being so embattled, I had to defend being feminist. Remember, we're about claiming feminist? So I became even more active in coalition groups. You know that thing about "coalition is not home" — Bernice Reagon's line. You know, you're supposed to be uncomfortable. I believe in that. I've always believed in that. And since I'm always uncomfortable anyway, we can do this work.

ANDERSON: What kind of coalitions?

ALLISON: Like with joining Necessary Bread [Affinity Group]. There are ways in which I thought a lot of the antinuclear activism was absurd and not my big issue, but it was coalition work and, Okay, if you're going to work with me on this, I'm going to work with you on that. So showing up and doing that stuff, doing a lot of early — when I was in New York, doing anti-apartheid organizing, which was really useful for me because it confronted a lot of my race stuff. Mostly raising money (laughs), the primary feminist activity. And then being a feminist who's an embattled feminist, who shows up at coalition organizations and just does that daily work. The last few years I was in New York, that was a lot of what I was doing.

ANDERSON: You were working with Women Against Rape?

ALLISON: New York Women Against Rape — on the board — and working with Amber. Also, because of going home and talking to my family and finding so much strength in that, I went back into doing a lot of focus on working-class issues, and talking about class issues, which I'd always talked about and always written about, but there's ways in which, curiously enough, in the feminist movement, it's a big issue, it's a primary issue, but it disappears out of the narrative steadily, and you constantly have to be calling attention to it.

Even with New York Women Against Rape, we did a number of teach-ins and conferences where we were trying to talk about how it affects your organizing — rape and shelter work and antiviolenace work — about talking about class issues. Now, I thought this was so basic to feminism that we would get lots of support and we could actually design

some ways to help women talk about class and color, because that's very intricate. Race and class is very intricate, especially in New York. And then there would be people — feminists — who would show up and say, "Class is not an issue." (laughs) "As soon as I became a lesbian, class disappeared. All lesbians are the same class." And I'm like, You're crazy. I can refute this on so many levels, but meanwhile, I don't want to refute this. Get out of here, we're going to do this work.

No. Got to back up, do the work, explain about class, do this, and, man, having to recapitulate the universe over and over, redefine why, in fact, class is a feminist issue. I found myself doing a lot of that the two years after Barnard.

ANDERSON: Is that when you started to write the essays that were *Skin*?

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And some of it seemed to me, it's like doing Feminism 101 again, just a real pain in the ass and very annoying. It's like, Why don't you people just go read the books? You're not going to read the books? Okay. I'll write a funny essay in which you will see some of this. Or I'll write a painful, heartbreaking essay, or I'll write a short story. And doing that, that was what I did. And the more work you do, the more people that you connect with, the more work you have to do. It was a very, very intense, busy time.

I also should say that, in my personal life, I ran away from a bunch of stuff. I did my first long-term lesbian relationship as a product of the Barnard conference — by accident, because the woman I was with, a middle-class butch girl, backed me up while I was under so much attack, and I just — Okay. She needed — or she said she needed — a kind of quasi-monogamy to feel comfortable. And so I made an arrangement with her in which I would be quasi-monogamous as close as I could get, to make her feel more safe in the relationship. I might be misrepresenting some of that. You should talk to her.

But it meant that I did a five-year relationship really badly. Really badly. I just should not have done it. Wrong woman, wrong time, and wrong for me. But I did it, and we wound up moving to New Jersey.

ANDERSON: Whoa. (laughs)

ALLISON: Yeah. And so I did a daily commute into Manhattan, which had a profound effect on both my activism and writing life, because it's hard to be an activist living outside the city — go to meetings.

ANDERSON: Then why did you guys move out there?

ALLISON: I think, in fact, because I wanted the hell out. Some of it was I wanted out of some of the harassment. Being required to stand up — and I'd defend myself in so many places and positions. That gets old and

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tiresome after a while. And I think, also, because I was still hurting and getting my feet under me.

But the other thing is that it meant that I did more writing, in part because I had an hour's commute in each day, and an hour — because I had a job. My girlfriend was often unemployed, but I have always had a job and always made an income, so I did that commute, and it meant I got more writing done. So maybe, on some level, that was part of why I made that decision.

And I was also still trying to figure out what kind of a pervert I really was. This is not an issue that we discussed, but it is a feminist issue. There are ways in which, if you identify as — you're a butch-femme lesbian, okay, that's who I am. But no, it's about what kind of a femme you are, and how, in fact, you actually act out all the myths of your own sexuality and your class upbringing. And that gets very complicated.

ANDERSON: So how are you figuring that out?

ALLISON: By actually stepping back and taking some time to look at it. And our negotiated quasi-monogamy took place in the context of the Lesbian Sex Mafia and parties — sex parties — some of which I organized deliberately because I believed in them. It was still about, if we organized for our sexual satisfaction and our safe sex lives with the same level of focus that we bring to our other organizing, what would that look like? So that meant honing orientations in which people could address any subject, but also organizing gatherings, some of which turned into parties. And then we organized parties.

ANDERSON: So what did a sex party look like? Describe a typical sex party, if there is one.

ALLISON: Actually, there is. Or there was. I don't know anymore, because I got older and I don't have any interest.

First, you have to have a safe place to hold it, so somebody has to sponsor it. That means there has to be a location, either a house or — well, the first ones we did were in one of the leather bars, one night a week in one of the leather bars in the Meatpacking District. Then you have to have people who are doing the work, which means people at the door. You have to have people who are going to be safety people, on many levels. One, just the sheer safety of sexual play, which in the pervert community is complicated. People bring in a lot of equipment, and some of them don't know how to use it. So you have to have people who know how to actually be assisting in that equipment. But also, people who can be present when people get drunk and lovers have fights. People show up who show up simply to confront or to be voyeurs. Now there's a certain kind of voyeurism that we honored, because it's a perversion, and we honored all perversions. But there are other kinds of that that are destructive and problematic.

Basically, it was about inventing a manners for how to have sex in public. The gay men's community has that traditionally, on some levels, but the lesbian community didn't.

ANDERSON: And these parties were only for lesbians or self-identified lesbians.

ALLISON: Self-defining lesbians. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So no (inaudible).

ALLISON: It was fun, and the real fun was working the door. We had one woman who wanted to check if they were packing, and I'm like, You know, we don't care. You just want to touch their pussies. No, we're not going to do that, that's not part of your job. Your job is to take their five dollars and make sure that they know what's coming, and warn them about what they're stepping into. Because some people would come curious, and there's going to be someone on the bar actually having sex in front of you. You're going to have a shocking experience if you're not ready for this.

That was a fascinating and wonderful thing. And we were following the model of other communities who had already done it, so some of that was — I had gone out to San Francisco and gone to one of the Outcast events, and we modeled what they had done, with a New York variation, because we had a sub-basement leather bar. The only man in was the bartender, and he was having a great time. He was, like, an honorary lesbian for the course of it.

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And we made connections with the gay men's leather men's community which, at least during the scandalous times when we were all being attacked, was very supportive. I actually got made an honorary leather man at some point and made a member. But then, later on, because we were still feminists and still fighting feminist issues, I got kicked out because they didn't approve of some of my feminist activism. I take pride in both those events. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So how did you make the sex parties feminist, or how would you —

ALLISON: What's feminist about a sex party?

ANDERSON: Yeah. How would you monitor that?

ALLISON: Oh goodness. One is that — My ideology, my conviction, is to honor all perversion, which means, you know, the girls that want to come and just watch get just as much respect as the ones who want to put on a show. A lot of people who go to parties — it's about exhibitionism and honoring that, but trying to make it so that no one was being harassed or forced to do stuff they didn't want to do. That gets very complicated.

And to a certain extent, you've got to know the people and know what's going on. It can pretty easily step over into being — what is it?

— matronizing. (laughs) “I don’t know that she really wants to be tied up in that way, Jean. You’re just talking her into doing this because there are all these people watching and you’re showing off, and she looks decidedly uncomfortable in a way she doesn’t enjoy.” You know, having to be that person is a pain in the ass.

ANDERSON: That was your job?

ALLISON: That was one of my jobs.

ANDERSON: To monitor that.

ALLISON: We had different people who did it. We had dungeon masters or party monitors who would act that way. It’s really profoundly complicated to have a feminist sex party. (laughs)

Some of it is simple. You make sure there’s food, you watch the consumption of liquor. You make sure there are no drugs, because then you get busted. You make sure there are no people underage, because then you get busted. You make sure nobody’s got a camera, because then people can get blackmailed. And you watched — you have certain rules for how parties proceed, which means you can — There are people who have the right, at any point, to step up and say, You really want this, honey? And intervene, but do it in a graceful manner. I brought Southern manners to sex parties in New York.

Now there was also, remember, a much larger heterosexual pervert community that had all these other parties, and we borrowed some of their systems. But we put what we thought was a profoundly feminist spin on it. I must say, they were enormously popular for a while.

ANDERSON: What years would you say?

ALLISON: Oh goodness, so — ’81. I left in ’87. And they’re still going on. They are still going on, but they’re no longer — They’re sponsored by different organizations, and they moved more into people’s homes, people who had the capacity for bringing in 80 people and letting them have sex all over the house.

It was interesting. When I moved to San Francisco, I went to join the Outcasts, and then joined up with some other people and worked with setting up independent parties, partly because I had a real complicated relationship to prostitution. I have a feminist critique of prostitution at the same time as I have a feminist appreciation of how, in some ways, prostitution can be empowering. Not generally in this culture, because there’s the Mafia and then we’re in a patriarchal society. But, in fact, if there were a feminist model for it, what would it look like? That’s an interesting question.

And I actually do believe, in some ways, I’m a libertarian. I think that people should be allowed to do what they want to do with

their lives. It would be nice if they were fully informed and had a range of choices. And also it would be nice if they were not going to be trapped in a system that was going to dominate their lives or destroy them or lead them to despair, which a lot of pornography and prostitution does. But to have a really complicated approach to it is tricky.

I met women who were doing feminist pornography. Now that's an interesting concept. As a lesbian, I absolutely understand it, because I've written some stories that are essentially just to get people hot and bothered, and I believe in that as a narrative stance and as a choice, but it's way complicated. There should be unions. (laughs)

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I've never been easy with any of this stuff. And running parties, feminist parties, was all about providing an alternative. Because there are ways in which suddenly the lesbian community looked to me to be conservative in ways I hadn't thought about, even as a feminist. I mean, the ideology of serial monogamy is pretty intense, and the fact that I have never been comfortable with it, just as a part of my paradigm. I don't think that I was non-monogamous as a feminist choice. I think I was non-monogamous because I was an incest survivor and I was afraid of intimacy. I invented an ideology to match my damage and to protect myself.

I think the women's movement had invented some ideologies out of the same impulse. Now some of those ideologies and some of those theories are profound and really are true and complicated and interesting, but some of them are self-serving. Looking at it and saying, Well, what if all these little baby dykes who are exhibitionists had a place in which they were given a safe environment to do their exhibitionism, instead of doing it, you know, at the bar two blocks from my house on a Saturday night, and doing it in high drama, you know, dyke drama. Dyke drama in costume at a sex party is one thing. It's really different from being an involuntary participant in it at the local bar on a Friday night.

We honored a lot of dyke drama, (laughs) and made it possible for people to explore some sexual choices in safety, and that's something we don't talk about. Because a lot of people have fantasies about their sex lives that are far more extreme than they will ever be capable of acting out on in their life. And they can screw themselves up thinking about the fantasy and never acting it out. Giving them a safe place where they can go play with it, try it out, and see what it really feels like, seemed to me to be a profound feminist act.

I still think it is, and I think that's one of the virtues of organizing sex parties, or organizing environments in which people can do some of this stuff in a place where they're not going to be trapped; in a place where they're not going to be endangered; in a place where there are people who, if you're lucky, have a sense of humor and a little information. That might help a whole bunch. I saw it help a whole bunch.

- ANDERSON: Did it help make you feel safer sexually?
- ALLISON: Yeah, even while letting me play out some of my own foolish fantasies. Well, some things you have to learn the hard way.
- ANDERSON: What was the difference between the ones in New York versus the ones in California, in terms of the people who would attend and the kinds of practices? (overlapping dialogue)
- ALLISON: This is going sound really — In actual point, the parties in New York were way more diverse in terms of access to communities. Way more women of color, way more working-class women. The lesbian community that I stepped into in San Francisco was profoundly middle class and profoundly conservative, so that even the range of what happened was more doctrinaire. It just didn't have the wild freedom or experimental nature that what we set up in New York had. But then, they had been doing it a lot longer, so there was a community in place that drew from itself, instead of opening up wide, the way we had done in New York.
- I think, in some ways, as time went on, in New York it became more conservative. It's also, there are a lot of people who will check this stuff out, but then not come back. They're not exhibitionist and they're not voyeurs, and they don't engage in that system. You need to realize that that's a lot of what happens at sex parties.
- ANDERSON: Right.
- ALLISON: There are huge numbers of people who would come to the parties we threw and not do anything, but then go home and do things for three days out of the energy that came out of the party. Discovering that phenomenon was fascinating.
- ANDERSON: The ripple effect.
- ALLISON: The ripple effect. Or even just the energy, the excitement. Or even being basically having people witness to you, that you could do this and it was okay. That was interesting.
- But it was really astonishing to me, moving to California. California is different. (laughs)
- ANDERSON: Why did you move to California? How did you make that decision?
- ALLISON: Oh God, that's really hard to —
- ANDERSON: Okay. Let's talk about that, and then we're going to put in a new tape, and then we'll talk about what you found there. So let's talk about why. How did Brooklyn sort of close itself out for you? Why were you leaving?

ALLISON:

Well, some of it is about the bad relationship that I established, my first monogamous — well, semi-monogamous. My first intimate long-term relationship other than my collective life. Not her fault on many levels, just the nature of what I did is where I discovered a lot of the flaws in my own butch-femme matrix. Because I was raised in my family, and that means — and I was raised to be — Oh man, there's no way to be clean about this. I was raised to be a slave. I was raised to take care of other people and destroy myself taking care of other people. Some of that is about codependence and alcoholism, raised in a non-alcoholic, alcoholic family, but I didn't understand any of that. All I knew was that I invented a really destructive relationship — to me personally destructive, and not good for her either.

So that after a few years, I was dying — literally physically dying — and reached a point where — not sleeping. In order to be an activist and do the work I was doing, just not sleeping. Going at such a pace, at such a level, that I was maintaining through the use of drugs, basically. Mostly my drugs were coffee and whiskey, but they'll work. (laughs) My immune system failed.

Now the other little detail. I had been in a relationship with a woman who was a heroin addict. I just loved them. I loved meeting heroin addicts. Self-destruction, ooh the romance! And she was HIV positive. And I had been consistently sick that last year, two years. I mean literally, just constantly not well. Some of that was not sleeping, but also getting every cold that came along, every little disease. And then I had an accident. I fell down a staircase and tore a ligament in my foot. It would not heal. In fact, I had bruises that would not heal, little cuts that would not heal.

And I was going to see my doctor, a really fine doctor, Barbara Starrett. And she fired me. She said, "You know, you're killing yourself." It was one of those moments where someone says, "You're killing yourself. How much do you sleep?" I wasn't going to tell her that I didn't sleep. I wasn't going to admit it. She says, "You know, your immune system is failing, and I'm treating gay men who want to live, who are dying, and you're killing yourself. I won't treat you anymore." So she fired me.

And then relatively shortly thereafter, my ex-girlfriend — the heroin addict — called me up to say she had tested positive for AIDS. All of a sudden it made sense. Oh, wait! I'm probably HIV positive. Because we were doing all kinds of fun stuff. I called Sterritt, and she's like, Well, yeah, that could be. So she had me come in, and she did an AIDS test. It coincided with a thing that was already in place, which — I was going out to Santa Cruz to visit a friend and do a reading, and I was going to be there for a week. It would be two weeks before I'd get the information back on the AIDS test, because that was the timing.

So I stretched the stay in California, took some time off work and went. And my relationship was a horror show. We were not even talking. We were living in that house in New Jersey. So I spent two

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weeks in California thinking, I'm going to die. It's amazing how that will shake you up. And I'm like, You know, I haven't even finished this book of short stories, and I've got half a novel, and I'm going to die. It would be, like, I would do this, do that, and I'd think, think, think. And everything was like, I'm going to die.

ANDERSON: Because you were certain that was going to be positive?

ALLISON: I was certain, I was sure. It explained so much. I remember I was down visiting my friend Darcy in Santa Cruz, and she had this typical California magical house, where you sit under a redwood tree next to a hot tub. I remember laying out there by myself, crying, because I'm going to die, and I don't want to die, not yet — I have a few things in mind first — and thinking. I think I made that classic Baptist bargain with God. "God, if I don't die, if get a little more time, I will do this, this, and this. And the first thing I will do is break up with this girlfriend. I'm doing her no good, she's doing me no good. I'll get the fuck out of New York." I made a list of the things I would do.

I came back to New York. I was on crutches, I should tell you, by this time, because my foot wouldn't heal. I went to see Sterritt, and she said, "You're HIV negative. I do not know how, because you have no immune system. You have a T-cell count of a gay man who has AIDS, but you're not HIV positive. You just simply have destroyed your immune system, and you have all these allergies that you've ignored your entire life, and if you're going to live, this is what you have to do." And she gave me a list. And so that's what I did. I did her list and mine. I told my girlfriend, "I'm leaving," and I quit my job.

It was much more complicated, it took time, and then I had to figure out where to go. I knew I had to get out of New York because I had to break the pattern of what I'd been doing. And I had my friend, Mab Segrest, in North Carolina, and she said, "You come down here and we'll find you a place." I knew this gay guy who had an apartment in Paris, and he said, "Oh, I'll give you my apartment in Paris." And I'm like, Right, that's going to happen.

Then Pat Califia was moving to San Francisco, and she had a truck which she was only going to half fill. And I thought, Well, I should go to California and become a Californian, you know, and get healthy. Because I had this whole fantasy of California. And that's pretty much — I paid for half of Pat's truck, shipped all my stuff with her. She left way before I could leave. She and her girlfriend dropped all my stuff off in an apartment, and it took me a couple of months to get out there.

By the time I showed up and had worked my way through the process, I was still on crutches, but I was paying attention to my allergies. And I just did the lesbian thing. I got a therapist. I said, "Okay, I have nearly killed myself. Help me figure out how not to kill myself." That was so awful, because he was this great gay guy who had been recommended to me by my friends, and I'm sitting there. We had

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the hour discussion. You have a therapist, you do the interview. I'd never gone to therapists anyway, because I didn't believe in it. I'm working class; we don't pay people for talking.

I'd sit there for forty minutes, and I'd talk through this process, and he's like, "You know, you're fascinating. I could talk to you for a year. We could do this," he says. "But I'm not going to do that to you. You're also classic." And he pulls out this sheet and he gives me a reading list. I'm good with reading lists. He says, "You need to do 90 meetings in 90 days. You're an incest survivor, you're an adult child of alcoholics, and you have entirely — once you read these books you'll see yourself."

And it was so embarrassing to read these books and see myself. (laughs) "Have you bought your girlfriend a car?" Yes, I have. You know, Check off all the things you've done. And I'm like, You're a classic. It was boring to be so predictable, but that's what I did. I did lists. It was a year of doing lists. I finished the short stories. I did 90 meetings in 90 days. I followed the rule of not getting in a relationship, which was easy for me. For me, my interpretation of that was, I can have sex with anybody, but only once. Which is how I met Alix. I dated her once and then wouldn't have sex with her again. And she could not believe that I wouldn't do it twice. And I'm like, But yes, I'm doing my rules. I had rules.

I joined the staff of *Out/Look*, because I'm a writer and an organizer, and started being an organizer on a much reduced level, because I was also trying to finish these stories. I was working my list from making my deal with God, who I don't actually believe in, but it didn't matter. I believe in baptism. It was a highly productive time. And studying California lesbians, who seemed to me to be largely middle class and self-deluded, but really interesting, really interesting.

ANDERSON: All right, we'd better stop there.

58:30

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ANDERSON: All right.

ALLISON: So San Francisco.

ANDERSON: This could be our last hour, we'll see.

ALLISON: Yeah, let's talk about it.

ANDERSON: Let's talk about what you found when you got to California. California lesbians, you were just saying, are a (inaudible) bunch.

ALLISON: The bunch — I moved into San Francisco. It would have been different if I'd moved into Oakland. I think I would have moved into a much more diverse community. But I moved into San Francisco, in part, in the aftermath of Barnard and the sex wars. And that I had spent some of that time thinking I was going to die. It was just one more push toward, I am just going to be matter-of-fact about who I am in the world. I am this — not high — low-femme bitch. This is my life, and I'm not going to fuck around anymore. And I'm not going pretend that I can be monogamous and do relationships and things. And then, of course, I had to add to the mix that I did go to an incest survivor's group, and I did some of that work that I had been avoiding for decades.

There's a lot of work you can do as a feminist to understand violence and the repercussions of violence and how it shapes you, but some of it is really resistant to change, really resistant. Going to meetings and realizing that I was not this unique, astonishing creature. No, we're all prone to self-destructive models. But the particular permutations of how I had organized my self-destructive life were really interesting and complicated.

I call myself high-function broken, which for me is a way of talking about all the ways that all the experiences of my life have contributed to making me a really — I mean, I can do shit. I can buckle down and work, and that is a power and a talent that many people don't have access to. But I am broken. You know, I was broken so young and so thoroughly that there is damage that — I tell people it's life work. I will get through this incarnation and barely manage to become what most people are to begin with. There's just some real serious broken parts of me. I try desperately not to be destructive with other people and act out who, in fact, my stepfather wanted me to be. But, you know, he got me when I was really a baby, so there are places where I'm just really profoundly self-destructive and broken.

Coming into San Francisco — boy, all of my friends in New York really hated that I moved to San Francisco. The people who love me, like Jewelle and Amber, were grateful and thrilled, because they were afraid I was going to die. And I was close to dying, or organizing my own death, in New York, and destroying myself. So they were

thrilled that I was going, you know, walking out of that relationship, leaving that environment, and trying to take care of myself.

They were happy about that, but they were also worried that I was moving to San Francisco, because I was going to go bad, was going to go California. I went California. I bought a crystal, you know? (laughs) I joined a massage group, I went to ACA [Adult Children of Alcoholics] meetings, and got myself a cat from the Oakland ASPCA [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] and joined a gym.

Some of the stuff that I was doing to try to be physically healthy — like recover from the damage to my immune system — meant that I had to do things like walk in sunshine. You know, this is really ridiculous, but I really did have some major depletion issues. Californians talk about all this stuff all the time, to a point where it struck me as really absurd. And that was some of my impression of California as la-la land and that whole level of what is encouraged, a level of self-indulgence in California that is normal, that I found almost amusing. (laughs) But I played it.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you adapted, huh?

ALLISON: I adapted. I did it. And gradually recovered my health, but it took at least a year. One of the things I did was that I set myself the task of walking. I had to learn to walk without a cane again and join a gym. I joined the gym in the Mission. I got an apartment in the Mission and joined the gym with what was essentially Mexican American Olympic bodybuilders, and they thought I was pretty absurd. I was pretty absurd. Here comes this fat dyke and she can barely hobble around. But I was — I'm good at doing lists.

In the same way, I joined feminist groups and started going to readings and public programs. I went to the Women's Center a few times, I went to the bookstores. But there was something going on in California that I knew very little about, which was that this community had also shattered, but they had shattered not as a result of the Barnard sex wars. They had shattered earlier in ways that did not make sense to me. But there were people I knew because of the small press movement and feminist publishing and from this feminist bookstore stuff, because I had been working with feminist bookstores for years. That — boy, they hated each other.

Some of it — I figured out pretty quickly — was that there had been lesbian couples who had started some of the institutions. And when those couples had broken up, some of the infighting was deeply personal, and it split. That's a phenomenon in our community that I understand and recognize, and I can work around it and understand it and deal with it. But when I got to San Francisco and it was cold, and I bought myself a leather jacket and — I'm femme, so I hung rhinestones all over it. I walked into the local women's bookstore on Mission Street, walked in the door, and got glared at like I was a monster from

5:00

outer space, and treated with contempt. And I'm a lesbian feminist writer. Those people were so mean and so unpleasant. I'm like, How the hell are you staying in business?

I quickly figured out they were barely staying in business, and that the community here was so embattled that all the fighting that I had seen and the resentment that was post-Barnard in New York, they had been doing a lot longer and a lot more virulently. I don't think they understood how bad it looked to someone stepping in fresh. But it was like there were so many feminist organizations you could not even engage with, because it was like, you showed up for a meeting and they wanted you to tell your beads, figuring out where you were on this fault line of old fights that they had in place that meant not a damn thing to me and I didn't care about. I wasn't dating them girls, so did I want to, like, make friends with one and fight the other?

So it was really remarkable not to join with feminist organizations, but I did not. I just backed up, come in another direction, and went into what was essentially a mixed organization, lesbian and gay organizing, which is different than just going into feminist stuff, because they weren't having such horrific fights and they weren't treating me so badly. Gay men actually think leather lesbians are kind of cute. They don't take us seriously, but I don't care, so it didn't matter.

But I joined *Out/Look* and met the people there. And there were things that I was used to and were normal for me that they didn't know about, because I had been working in small press publishing and queer publishing for so long that, you know, I know a lot and I know how to do stuff, so I could contribute. I started making friends.

One of the complications was that I had had a number of gay male friends in New York die, so I was hesitant to make new friends in the gay men's community. But, you know, it's going to happen anyway. So I became friends with Bo Houston, even though I resisted because I knew Bo had AIDS and he was not doing well. I remember when I started deciding, You know, some of these boys are going to die, and I don't think I can stand it again, but what are you going to do?

But that was also a different writing community. San Francisco's writing community, again, struck me as very California. People took a long time to finish books, and they didn't publish much, and they could talk about being a writer even though they had never published a thing and never seemed to take the word terribly seriously. I'm like, Wait a minute. What have you written? (laughs) It was a very interesting education. In some ways, a lot less professional and a lot less focused, a lot less ambitious, and there were ways in which that was really good for me, really good for me. They had a sense of humor.

Some of what had really gotten tiresome about New York was that the sense of humor had slacked quite a bit there. People were so serious. So I made friends and new connections, met some really interesting, complicated people, nominally heterosexual, which was interesting — feminist heterosexual writers, which I had had not that

but also some of the girls — who have that same matrix. They love authority. They do well in situations of defined authority. They love their country and they have a whole ideology of America that believes in what this country stands for.

To be teaching young queer kids in mixed programs — university programs or some of the summer programs I teach in — means I meet them when they will talk about that stuff. They believe they want to be a part of something, some force for good, so they have a concept of what they will do. Some of them will volunteer to go to Iraq, believing in it, under this president, this criminal administration, in this terrible time. And trying to talk to them about their lives in complicated ways as queers has been overwhelming and devastating.

One of the best young writers I've met in the last decade — a wonderful young working-class woman from Michigan — trying to talk her out of re-upping; knowing for a fact that if she re-ups, she'll be in Iraq. "No, honey, don't do this, please don't do this." And then having to argue with her and talk with her about all the reasons that she thinks she should do this, and realizing where, in fact, we've lost a lot of kids. They don't know their own history; they don't know their history in his last century. They don't know the history of the United States since the Vietnam War. But they also don't know their history as queers. So they do not know what, in fact, they're going to be presented with when they have to go into the don't-ask-don't-tell military.

Meanwhile, they're full of faith and passion, and a commitment to a genuine sense of freedom and an ideology of this country that is this country at its best. But they're not living in this country at its best. They're living in this country at its worst moment in what I think is two centuries.

I think this is the most criminal administration since [Ulysses] Grant, and they'll all go to jail if we do our jobs. But meanwhile, our kids are getting ground up, and they don't have a community. This is the thing that is overwhelming to me. They don't have the community that we have or that we put in place. And they think they do because of the Internet and because there are queers on television. They think there is a community. But they do not have the immediate access to resources and support that we put in place in our bookstores, in our women's centers, in our rape crisis centers. Fuck, they don't even have the support that the gay men put into place in the bars. They have the illusion of it. It's scary to watch.

I'm still hopeful though, because there are still people who are willing to be foot soldiers in a revolution and who hope for the best. And they read the books. The books are still there. There was just this wonderful celebration of Pat Parker's life. You can be a young queer and read Pat Parker and know things that nobody's going to tell you on daytime television in America right now.

ANDERSON: How do they respond to your work that's different?

40:00

ALLISON:

Well, it's interesting. For the most part, what I run into over and over again is that they're — When I show up, the thing that most astonishes them is my sense of humor, because they're not used to the concept of a feminist with a sense of humor. I meet a lot of young queers whose mothers or aunts are flannel lesbians, Birkenstock lesbians, so their idea of who a lesbian is, is kind of — I'm not that person. (laughs) I'm raucous and working class, and I've got a very advanced sense of humor, and it is often astonishing to them, and it's kind of freeing, but it takes a bit. First they're in shock, and then they get all giggly, and they'll tell me wonderful stories.

And then I get letters. Jesus God, I get letters. That's the bane and the wonder of my life, is the correspondence, because I get just enormous numbers of letters from young queers. They read *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and then they read — The two things that trigger it all the time are *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. A lot of it is because of the butch-femme stuff in there. And then they read *Skin*. And they'll write me because they want feminism. They want the license to be themselves and to change the world, and they're not getting enough of it, so they write me. Oy, oy. And there are ways in which I fail completely to be what they want me to be. (laughs)

But then again, Grace Paley just died. I remember meeting Grace Paley and trying to make her a living saint, because there are ways in which I think she was and is in my life. Having Grace Paley, with her highly advanced sense of humor, tease me out of making her into something she was not. And so I try to keep it in mind that I am willing to let them make me over into what they need as long as we remember that I'm still myself and we can struggle around this.

I want the stories. I fight constantly. The thing about having been a finalist for the National Book Award and being semi-respectable in some circles is that I can fight at a lot of these magazines to get young queer writers published. And I do that, because they're losing the access to getting their stories published in queer venues. There are just fewer and fewer of them. In some ways they're going to be — We're at a transition point. There are going to be more, and the Internet is going to provide some access, but it's not enough now.

So in some ways, the community has shut down and is shutting down. I see ways that it's coming back, but the kids are going to have to make it, and they're going to have to make it out of their own need. I can help some. I can help by reading their stories, pushing them to do their best stories, getting them published in venues that — experimental publications and places like *Tin House*, getting them to look at queer stuff, because they will. There really has been a sea change in that there is not so much prejudice against queer material. They often don't have the skills to actually judge some of it, but you can fight to get young queers published. You do still have to fight though.

ANDERSON:

Yeah.

45:00

ALLISON: And they need all the help they can get. And they need to be held to a high standard and not to become caricatures of themselves. The hardest thing is to persuade them that they don't have to explain. Explaining is the death of good writing. Don't explain. Just put the story on the page and let the reader work it out.

This last year I taught a workshop as part of the Lambda program, and there are ways in which I think that the Lambda Literary Awards — it's very conservative on one level, very. But meanwhile, if you're going to get access to young queers, you still need to step into those venues and do that stuff.

Really interesting young writers. If they all do the work that they could do, it will be a different world. That makes me very hopeful — deeply hopeful. And God, they're going to suffer in the process, and that makes me sad. I wish they had more support. I wish they had just some of the things that I've had. Lord.

ANDERSON: Do you ever wake up here and wonder how you got here?

ALLISON: All the time.

ANDERSON: I mean, you've been in Guerneville for how long? Ten years?

ALLISON: Well, we moved up here just before Wolf was born, and he's 15.

ANDERSON: Okay. So you've been living in a small town in northern California for 15 years.

ALLISON: I took three years out.

ANDERSON: You're the mother of a teenage boy.

ALLISON: Yeah. (laughs)

ANDERSON: You've been in a committed relationship for almost 20 years?

ALLISON: Good God, yes.

ANDERSON: This is not the life you imagined 20 years ago.

ALLISON: But I never imagined living this long either.

ANDERSON: No, you didn't, but this also doesn't resemble how you were setting yourself up.

ALLISON: No, no, and I try constantly to have it not become predictable or easy. Life will correct you, life will shake you up. Stuff happens. The criminal enterprises of this government — and then people die that you love, and you look again at your life. Also, watching lesbians get old,

the older lesbian community, because now I'm getting to be an older lesbian. (laughs) We don't take care of our own very well, and we don't provide resources, and what safety net was in place is gone. That's scary. Meanwhile, I've stumbled into being middle class.

ANDERSON: How did that happen? Beyond the success of your books.

ALLISON: I married well.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you did. Is that a comfortable place for you to be, calling yourself middle class? This life, this whole –

ALLISON: No, no. I also don't believe it. And that is another fight, because there is a lot of — I'm raising a middle-class child, and I've been enjoying having a middle-class childhood with him, but I grew up in my family. And one of the things that I talk about constantly is that, if you're shaped in a working-class family, even if you manage to find some margin by which you begin to live a middle-class existence, you were still shaped by and you are the product of that family. You are still essentially working class. There is stuff I can't change, is just not going to change, and it's a constant struggle in my family.

My son is invariably teasing me because I have to have canned food in the cupboard — have to — and he is constantly going through the canned food, explaining to me that I've got old canned food that's going to kill him, and then he makes jokes about it. He can. He's been raised middle class. It's not a joke to me. I begin to panic.

I'm bad at money. I'm bad at taking care of money, paying bills, paying taxes, because I have all these places of conditioned panic and desperation that come out of being raised poor. The places where I become fearful, hesitant, and wrong-headed are essentially about having been raised poor in this culture and in a state of contempt, which is a working-class life. Middle-class people don't have those fault line breaks.

Now, the criminal thing that we do is that we take the children of the working class and we give them scholarships and send them to college, and then we tell them they're not working class. But they work through the world out of the patterns that were taught to them and ingrained in them. So, you know, I can remember the socialists and the commies talking about the bourgeoisie, and the worst of the bourgeoisie is the middle class that got a little cash. We are the petite bourgeoisie, and we are easily criminalized. We easily go bad because we're fearful. Yes, goddammit, we're fearful. We are still the working class. We just have a little more access to resources. It doesn't mean we know how to use those resources or that we trust them. We can't even act in our own self-interest sometimes. It's that much damage.

We need a more complicated way to talk about it, particularly for all those kids that got scholarships, went off to college, lost their families of origin — because there is that break that happens, and

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you've got to do some work to get your family back once that break has happened. But we don't genuinely become middle class. We don't genuinely have access to things.

In my relationship with Alix, the complicated stuff that I have learned — because she was raised middle class. So she has — I call it the sense of entitlement that she was raised with. She believes that she is entitled to certain things. I don't, I can't. I fight desperately to make myself act as if I do, but I do not have that thing.

One of the reasons that makes our relationship successful is that, as a teenager, she fell out of that network and went off to — she went to jail and a halfway house, and became an alcoholic and lived on the street, and got an immersion in working-class life that changed her profoundly, but it didn't make her working class. She went off to jail and acted like a middle-class girl and, you know, they were generous with her and didn't kill her and taught her a few things, but she had all of that conditioning. She's still who she was. All the stuff that has changed in the life that she has lived since — living on the streets, being a drunk, getting sober, joining the army, getting kicked out — she still has all that conditioning and that sense of entitlement that I can't acquire. I can't acquire it. And my boy has it, and I worked hard that he should have it because it gives you a lot more safety and power in this culture.

We don't even have a language for talking about a lot of this stuff, and it means that we work against our own interests. A lot of these working-class academics are working against their own interests, and they don't even understand it. When you tell them, Yes, you're still working class, you're still a part of your tribe. You can speak on events at this new tribe that you joined, but you're still a product of your tribe. It has a huge impact to tell them that they still are who they were, because they're being robbed. You need to take pride in your people and speak for them.

ANDERSON: Does Wolf have a sense of being a part of your people that way?

ALLISON: He's scared to death of my people. He's met them. (laughs) He talks about my sisters as *the scary aunts*. He's right. My sisters are scary. I love them but, yeah, they get — you know. It's a different world, growing up in a queer family in northern California.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So they don't feel like his people to him.

ALLISON: I think that he's just at the point where he's beginning to do self-definition — 15, adolescence. He's a young 15. So we're just beginning to watch that happen.

He takes enormous pride in Alix and me, and he has already gotten in fights defending us. And he has a sense of us, and he identifies as a bisexual, when I can tell you, frankly, I don't see any bi in him. The boy falls in love with boys. But who knows who he's

going to be or how that is all going to work out, but he identifies that he is essentially queer, and he's already paid for it. Even in northern California, it's an embattled position. He was ten the first time that it was made clear to him how dangerous it was to be who he was. And we have done everything we can to protect him and to educate him and to hold the world accountable and go to school. I go to PTA, Jesus God!

But it is still a struggle, and it is going to be a struggle. I think it's going to get more complicated because I think he's going to be a codependent kid, because he's a caretaker. He loves us, and I have my stuff, and he's always, he wants to take care of his mommas. Ooh, now there's stuff about that that's wonderful and admirable, but I've been through incest survivors groups and ACA meetings, and I know where it can also go, and, Lord help him, he's going to grow up and buy his boyfriend a car. Oh, (sighs) I have to talk to him more about that. We try to talk to him a lot about how real life works and some of this stuff.

ANDERSON: Is it a struggle for you to parent?

ALLISON: Oh Christ, yes, and it's scary, very frightening. Alix is — I wouldn't have done it with anyone else. Some of the virtues are her particular matrix, her particular kind of butch and the risks she's willing to take, but also that she's been sober so long. She just has a lot of tools in place.

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It's peculiar, the mesh of the sober community and the feminist community. There's an enormous amount of information and power there that has been vital to my life. I'm not really an alcoholic or a drug addict. In my family, it's the boys who have those problems. I'm just bent and deeply broken, but I use all the resources of those communities, and it's made a huge difference.

But it's sometimes so astonishing to me to sit up and look around, living in this beautiful place, in this family that I adore. Thank God I've got them, because the rest of the country is really sucking a big egg right now. I don't believe in it, don't trust it. I try to keep in mind that it's a privilege and a wonder to occupy this place, and I get to do work that I love. I mean, it's always tricky about making a living as a writer, and people think you're rich. You have a movie, you must be rich. Yeah, right, son. God, I'm still a dyke, unemployable in most places in the world. It's a real struggle. And at the same time, it's an enormous privilege.

I tell young writers that there is a kind of way in which you will always be poor if you're a queer writer. You will. You'll never make the money that heterosexuals make, it's a fact. And as a writer, you will never make the money that a lot of other enterprises will make. But this is a poverty that is, by comparison to the poverty I have known, so genteel, so much easier.

Oh God, but it does — Part of why I live where I live is you can live up here in this small-town, semi-rural environment. We couldn't survive in San Francisco. I'd have to make more money, and I wouldn't

be able to raise my child in the middle-class way in which I want to raise him. I want him to have all that access to resources that I never had. It is a wonder and a privilege.

The wealth though. The richest thing in my life has been the people I have known. Let's be clear. I'm not being sentimental or small when I say this. I've known extraordinary people who gave their full selves to changing the world. Do you know what I mean? Who believed in something larger than themselves. So many people in the world have no concept of that. Who live their lives in self-contempt, in self-hatred, in meaninglessness, in feeling that they have no purpose. I have been among people who knew themselves to have purpose, who shared that purpose with me. They have been my friends and my lovers. I could die tomorrow, and it has been an extraordinary journey. I just don't want to die tomorrow.

ANDERSON: And you live in California, so you probably won't. You've still got your acupuncturist.

ALLISON: Well, with any luck, I can help put this administration in jail, and then do the work to — We're going to have to do so much work in the world, as Americans, over the next few decades. Oy vey.

ANDERSON: And writing is going to be a huge part of that.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: It's going to be your stories (inaudible) translate.

ALLISON: It's also one of the things saving us now. I literally teach all over the world and get paid to do it, which is kind of miraculous. Pity I don't get paid as well as I'd like to be, but — Going to other countries and meeting people — they read our books. They know that the war that we're engaged in, the criminal actions that this country has been engaged in recently, do not reflect the majority of this country. They read our literature, and in our literature we are occasionally our best selves. I believe in that. It's a reason to write. And in our literature we have created a feminist presence that is powerful. It has changed us, it has changed this country, it has changed the world. A lot of people don't keep track of it, but even the most fearful conservative people in America have an imagination of how they want their girls to live that is entirely a product of what have managed — some of it the literature, some of it the education. It's a different world for that reason.

ANDERSON: Absolutely.

ALLISON: So there is feminism, even though very few people want to own the name anymore.

ANDERSON: That's true. Thank you. We're out of time.

ALLISON: Good.

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END TAPE 5

END OF INTERVIEW

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